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THE CELESTIAL SURGEON

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THE

CELESTIAL SURGEON

BY

F. F. MONTRÉSOR

AUTHOR OF "THE ALIEN," "AT THE CROSS ROADS,"
"INTO THE HIGHWAYS AND HEDGES," ETC.

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THE CELESTIAL SURGEON

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE Yellow House stood north of Durham, surrounded by its own rather dreary park, and some twelve miles from any station.

The garden that had once given homeliness and grace to the place had fallen into neglect. Loneliness is never complete where flowers spring, but of late the staff of gardeners had been reduced, the lawn had become a field, and the roses had relapsed into dog-roses. Even so, in June and July, their tender pink and white petals softened the austerity of desertion, but when autumn came the old house stood nakedly desolate and dishonoured.

It was a dignified and stately building, with a strong individual character. Its walls were of yellow stone; the huge blocks had been taken from a quarry that had been worked till the time of the Commonwealth. Careful and unstinted labour had gone to its making; it had been designed for the home of many generations.

An open parapet inscription testified to the pious pride that the original founder, Roger de Grouchy, had in the cradle of his race.

"*Dei Gloria in Excelsis*" stood out, bold and joyful, against the sky, but over the stone mantelpiece in the hall was carved, "Blessed be the Lord my God who maketh my hands to war and my fingers to fight."

The fighting instinct had been stronger than the building. The De Grouchys had been brilliant soldiers and bad

squires. They had made good lovers and bad husbands. They had won money easily, and got rid of it quickly. They had had devoted adherents, but, like the Stuarts to whom they had clung, they brought bad fortune to their friends.

The Yellow House had seen many tragedies since the time when the grandson of old Roger had staked it with all it contained on a throw of the dice, and had lost his wager to the West Countryman, Sir Everard Cardew, who was a noted gambler too in his day.

Dame Alice de Grouchy was among the contents of the house, and the words which she said, when she heard of that night's work, are still preserved among the family traditions—

"My poor body is and has always been my lord's, to have and to hold, to waste and to spoil. It may go with his other chattels, for it belongeth to no other but himself." So she is reported to have spoken. "But as for my soul, that never was my lord's, nor never shall belong to any new-made master. That lieth outside his bargain, and goeth not with the rest, but shall instead go through a small round door to its own place."

Sir Everard Cardew (so the story runs) ran up the stairs in hot haste to claim his winnings. It is said that he had hankered after the lady for many a month. He found the room called the blue drawing-room ablaze with light, the wax candles all aflame as if for festival, and roses on the table.

On a couch sat Dame Alice, dressed all in yellow satin, and with the jewels that had been part of the wager on her neck and arms and hands and in her hair, but with a bullet-hole through her heart.

Sir Everard stood gaping at the "small round door," through which the blood was flowing, then turned aghast and fled, but catching his spur in the balustrade as he ran, fell headlong down the stair, and lay with broken neck, ston dead, at the bottom.

He was buried in his own county, far enough from his il fated winnings, and in the next generation the Cardews sc the property back to the De Grouchys, who had held it si

in a loose, careless grasp. Sometimes the family had lived for brief seasons on their estate, oftener they had drained what they could out of it and lived elsewhere. The house had had its high days and hours of glory. It had once been besieged by Oliver Cromwell, and one panelled room bore the marks of bullets. Those were honourable and cherished scars which added to its beauty, but of late years it had fallen on worse days! Its melancholy loneliness had been invaded. Paper bags and orange-peel had desecrated the grass of its deserted park. Strident voices broke its silence. Crowds of Durham sightseers, shopkeepers out for a holiday, tourists with Cook's tickets, came driving in char-a-bancs up the avenue, or woke the echo round the lake which lay grey and cold to the east of the house.

Mr. Knight was in a char-a-banc when he got his first glimpse of the Yellow House. He was tired and cold, depressed by the March wind, and bothered by too close proximity with bad tobacco, but he sat upright with awakened interest when the old Jacobean building came in view.

"A fine old place. If it were mine I'd live in it," said he.

Mr. Knight was nearing forty-five when this story begins, and he had reached a point in life when it seemed to him that the rest of the road to the grave lay before him, flat and somewhat uninteresting. No sudden reverse of fortune, no extraordinary mishap accounted for his depression, but his mother had died of old age in the winter, and after her death he had been dangerously ill with an attack of influenza. He had never before been seriously ill, and he had been extremely fond of his mother. He found it a hard matter to cope with the unexpected amount of pain that her loss gave him, and, when he emerged from his bedroom, was astonished to find himself incapable of attending to business.

On being reluctantly forced to take a holiday, he found himself equally incapable of attending to play.

He wandered discontentedly from hotel to hotel, trying with pathetic assiduity to be amused and to get well. He wandered over Scotch moors with aching legs and a leaden weight at his heart. Finally he gave up Scotland in despair, and

was about to return to his native Norwich *viâ* Durham, when he happed on the best possible cure for *ennui*—he fell in love.

It was love at first sight—not with a woman (that, indeed, might have done the business even more effectually), but with the neglected beauty of the Yellow House.

"If it were mine," he had said, and he played with the idea of possession.

It was an absurd idea, of course, but his sick mind fed on it. He was thankful to feel the greyness lifting, to know that he could again take an interest in something. He had concealed his melancholy as if it had been a crime, but he fastened with relief on this alleviation.

And now, for the credit of this elderly hero, it must be asserted that he was no hypochondriacal misanthrope. On the contrary he had always believed himself to be of an eminently business-like and practical turn of mind. He was a well-educated man, and one whose appearance invited trust. He was city bred, but country born. His grandfather had kept a furniture shop in Norwich; his father had owned the largest business in the old town, and had died rich. His mother, who was the daughter of a yeoman farmer, had been considered fortunate when she married Thomas Knight, for a man who counts his income by the thousand can aspire nowadays to marry with the gentry. Mr. Knight, however, preferred to stick to his own class! He was very proud of it!

Thomas Knight the second was the only child of a happy union.

Till the day when he was caught by influenza he had never spent twenty-four hours at a stretch in bed. He had inherited a fine, healthy constitution, both morally and physically. He had an alert, spare figure, clear grey eyes, and a clear complexion. He was clean-shaved, and his mouth and chin were finely modelled. His cheek-bones were high and too prominent, his forehead broad and low. He, like his father, declared himself proud of belonging to the "great middle class," and he had never received the public school stamp. His

father had seen no use in the "University," though he had not grudged money for the son's education.

Mr. Knight was considered a "well-informed" man. He took an intelligent interest in many subjects, but was a little too much inclined to improve the occasion. His mother had belonged to the Society of Friends, and though he did not hold her views, there was a certain old-fashioned politeness about him that had in it the flavour of Quaker origin. The business that had flourished under the father's *régime* spread in all directions under the son's. Mr. Knight, when he came to that period in which he felt so singularly at a loss, was a very wealthy man so far as money was concerned.

Had he been poorer, the pursuit of wealth might still have given zest to his existence; as it was, he had more than enough means, and no particular aim. His unostentatious charity did not satisfy his heart. He had no desire at all to marry, and the old woman he had petted was dead.

Perhaps on the whole he was rather to be pitied, at any rate until the moment when the Yellow House charmed him. After that he was as fortunate as most of us. We all of us want something added to our Daily Bread, our digestions being so made that we can't assimilate the actual without some garnishing of the ideal. The Yellow House supplied the ideal to Thomas Knight.

One sometimes finds romance, as one finds a sense of humour, in unexpected places. This good gentleman was unromantic where women were concerned, but old buildings and old pictures, and even old families, had a fascination for him that he could not himself account for.

He haunted that stately, melancholy old park by sunrise, and watched the awakening glow between the branches of the oaks. He haunted it by sunset, and marked the effect of the "*Dei Gloria in Excelsis*" cut out against the reddening sky, in bold letters along the roof. The open parapet inscription pleased him; he had never seen its like before. He disliked the crowd of sightseers who invaded the place on Wednesdays; he was actually jealous on its behalf, and indignant

with its owner for allowing it to be so exploited. Mr. Vincent, the butler, shared his feelings, but was ruefully aware of the pressing need for those shillings that were paid at the gates. Vincent had grown white in the service of an unsatisfactory master. His wages were in arrears, and his deeply-lined, wizened little face wore an habitually melancholy expression. Depression is terribly catching. Even the hilarious crowd of holiday makers were reduced to nervous whispering by the time they had made the round of the house.

Mr. Knight took his seat in the char-a-banc and drove along the now familiar road, for the fifth time, one fine May afternoon. He would have preferred to have gone alone, but the house was only open once a week, though it was easy to trespass in the park at any time. Mr. Knight wished to take one more look at the grand staircase, which, starting from the centre of the hall, forked into two branches and led up to the gallery to right and to left. Mr. Knight delighted in this staircase; it wholly satisfied his eye and taste, and was, to his mind, almost as exquisite as a design of Nature's.

Old Vincent mounted the stairs wearily, and paused at intervals to throw scraps of information to the sightseers who pressed on his heels. If he had given vent to his feelings in poetical language he would have cried, "Thy glory is departed, and strangers make a mock at thy desolation." He turned with absolute fury on a fat old dame who put her finger through a hole in the tapestry, and the incident (though she had meant no harm) so rankled in his mind, that he was quite upset by it, and did his duty as showman incoherently and badly. Mr. Knight was sorry for the old fellow, who seemed to him a curious relic of feudalism. When they reached the west wing (which was the oldest part of the house) he pressed a sovereign into Vincent's hand, and lagged behind in the blue drawing-room. The people clattered away, and the accustomed silence of the room, so incongruously broken for a few minutes, closed round him again. He was glad to rest His legs ached, his head ached, and his back ached, ar he was physically depressed. He was impatient with th legacies of illness, and disregarded them as much as poss

but the long drive in the hot sun had been too much for him, and the cool quietness was grateful.

Now there was, as Mr. Knight knew, a belief current in the county that it was unlucky for any one who was not a de Grouchy born to possess the Yellow House. It was also said that if such an one were so foolish as to venture into the blue drawing-room on the day of his instalment, he would of a surety see the candles alight on the mantelpiece, and would smell roses whatever the time of year; furthermore he would see a dead woman in a satin gown with a bullet-hole through her heart. It was added (but some declared that this was a modern addenda to the original ghost story) that when the horror of the sight seized the intruder, so that he should turn to flee, he would not go out of that room as sane and sound as he was when he entered it; a strange madness, hardly perceptible at first, but always increasing, would have touched his brain and would ultimately work his ruin. Where he had heretofore been most wise he would become foolish, and that which he had loved most he would hate. The superstition had grown on to the grim bit of history about Alice de Grouchy; it had sprouted like a fungus, fed by the sin and misery of long ago. Mr. Knight remembered it with an amused smile, while he leant back in his chair and looked up at a portrait of Dame Alice's husband.

The portrait was blurred by time, but it was still possible to see that it represented a soldierly-looking man, whose curiously wide-apart eyes glanced boldly from the canvas. The hand was on the hilt of a sword.

"A very pretty fellow who thinks no small beer of himself," Mr. Knight remarked.

Of late years he had occasionally wished that he possessed a son to leave his wealth to, and he would have liked that son to have been a soldier. Indeed he had a trick (of which no one had ever suspected him) of holding purely imaginary conversations with an imaginary youth, who benefited by his store of experience, and who called him "governor." His advice to this candid young man was marked by the shrewd wisdom and tactful sympathy that characterises the dealings

of spinsters and bachelors with their spirit children. A man's dreams are of such delicate stuff that it seems almost sacreligious to touch them. It is doubtful whether Thomas Knight ever took stock of these hidden fancies, or counted them in his own estimate of his character; perhaps that was why his own estimate ultimately proved mistaken.

Presently his head dropped a little forward, and he roused himself with a start; but there was plenty of time as yet, why should he not sit still and meditate quietly for half an hour? He stretched his legs out comfortably, and then willy-nilly his eyelids closed. There was a bustle of departing char-a-bancs at the front of the house, but this room looked on to the courtyard and the chapel, and the sound did not reach it. The char-a-bancs drove off, and Mr. Knight slept on. He had suffered greatly from insomnia since his illness, but at last he was making up arrears. His sleep deepened; his lips parted, and his face appeared already less tired and worn. He was benefiting immensely by the rest. The shadows gathered round him, the soft tender veil of twilight was being drawn, the old house was very still. The ghosts of past tragedy might steal out undisturbed now.

Perhaps they stole into Mr. Knight's dreams. At any rate the sleeper at last stirred, and then frowned uneasily. It seemed to him that the picture he had been staring at was walking about the room, and addressing some one, possibly himself, in plaintive and melancholy accents.

"If I had only known you were coming to-night everything should have been ready, sir;" and then, with a sudden and complete change of tone, "But who the devil is this?"

The last question rang so sharply and insistently through the room that it cleaved the dream. Mr. Knight sat up with a jump and rubbed his eyes.

"I am Thomas Knight," said he, and then became aware that though he certainly was wide awake now, James de Grouchy still stood before him.

True, he had laid aside his sixteenth-century dress, and he had grown considerably older; but the wide-apart eyes and the broad forehead were there, and the expression was that of

the portrait on the wall. Mr. Knight glanced from the living James to the picture, and then smiled at his own fancy.

"I must beg a thousand pardons, sir," said he, "for I feel convinced that you must be the master of this house, and that I am trespassing shamefully. The fact is that I have lately been ill; I was absurdly tired, and I lingered behind the other excursionists to rest for a few minutes. I had no idea that I should be caught napping; I will go and rejoin my party at once."

Mr. de Grouchy's indignation vanished. "Pray do not hurry yourself," he said; "it is just eight o'clock, and I believe that the last char-a-banc left my courtyard at 7.30. You cannot possibly rejoin your friends now."

"But I only closed my eyes for a minute. It surely is impossible that it can be eight o'clock."

De Grouchy held up his hand. The chapel bells were chiming the hour. Both men counted the strokes, then Mr. de Grouchy laughed aloud.

"I must apologise again," said Mr. Knight, and this time he was really perturbed.

"No, no!" cried the other, with whimsical good-humour; "I am delighted to see you. I dislike my own company at the best of times, but to-night I was dreading it. Will you not do me the honour of dining with me, Mr. Knight? You own you have been ill. You cannot trudge back to your hotel fasting. Why, we are a matter of ten miles from Durham, and the road is in an abominable state, as I know to my cost. I would offer you a horse, but I had a spill coming down the hill, and the poor brute has grazed his knees. Now I come to think of it you are bound to stop the night, more by token that we are in for a storm—look there!"

He pointed with his whip to the heavy clouds that were rising behind the chapel.

Mr. Knight protested but feebly. In his heart he desired to accept the invitation. He was ruefully aware that a ten-mile walk was beyond his present strength; moreover, the place, the host, and the unexpected, all attracted this usually sober city gentleman.

"You are exceedingly kind, and I ought to be ashamed to

trespass any further on your undeserved hospitality," he said but allowed himself to be overborne.

The manner and turn of his speech were a little old-fashioned, but they amused Mr. de Grouchy.

"After all the fellow is not offensive," he reflected, "And perhaps he will keep the blue devils at bay."

Those same blue gentlemen had leaped out of a letter that had been waiting for the master in the hall, but probably their blueness was increased by the fact that De Grouchy was decidedly shaken by the fall he had had. He was in a good deal of pain, though he would not give way to it. His attitude towards pain or illness being always defiantly perverse, he was angry when he was hurt, and misfortune had an apparently bad effect on his morals.

He questioned Vincent about his guest, and learned that Mr. Knight had paid many visits to the Yellow House.

"He ain't exactly one of *us*, sir," the old man said, "but he is above the set as usually comes in the char-a-bancs, and," he added with a remembrance of the sovereign that jingled in his pocket—"and he is a very liberal gentleman."

CHAPTER II

"A VERY liberal gentleman," De Grouchy humorously repeated old Vincent's words later, when he was conversing with his guest in the panelled dining-room.

He left out the first part of the sentence, of course, but he reproduced the old man's voice and manner to a nicety. He was a born actor and mimic; he seemed to catch the very spirit of the person he made fun of; and though he was not in the least careful to stick to the letter of the truth, his embellish ments were always in character. When he put words into people's mouths they were always words which they might conceivably have used had they happened to think of them.

Mr. de Grouchy was a man who gave the impression of extreme and generous frankness—he was apparently unreserved to a fault. It required some experience of his ways to discover that he was very capable of keeping his own counsel when he chose, and that he frequently made a present, in a burst of confidence, of information that was already known to the town crier.

Mr. Knight had seldom passed a pleasanter evening than he passed that night. The wine was excellent, but De Grouchy's society in itself was as stimulating as champagne. He told the most curious and interesting stories about the pictures that hung on the dining-room walls. When he saw that his guest was interested in family chronicles he proved a mine of varied and picturesque information.

He drank to an extent that surprised Mr. Knight, but his speech remained clear and his hand steady. After dinner was over the two men stood on the terrace to watch the storm.

The lightning flashed behind the oaks, the branches stood out black and quivering in momentary revelations.

"On such a night Dame Alice killed herself and founded our most old-fashioned and respectable form of ghost story," said De Grouchy, with a laugh. "We've been d——d unlucky ever since. Do you believe in luck?"

"I don't know that I do," said Mr. Knight cautiously.

"I've cause to! The old place won't be ours much longer. My wife's fortune patched mine for a time; but, patch or no patch, I've never yet managed to cut my coat according to my cloth. We're not tailors; we're soldiers by instinct. It's a pity, too, and entirely my fault. I never contradict *that* statement however often it's made."

Mr. Knight looked with kindly eyes at the younger man, and De Grouchy was at once aware of his companion's sympathy. De Grouchy was always conscious of how he impressed people. He was never wittingly a hypocrite, but he had a genius for instinctively acting the most acceptable *rôle*.

While he blamed himself with engaging frankness, he yet gave the impression that he had been painted blacker than he was.

"Oh, I'm head over ears in debt," he said, "and the odd thing is, my debtors never pay me! I'm not good at dunning, I suppose."

It was a matter of common gossip that he was an unfaithful husband, but somehow Mr. Knight arrived at the belief that the man was paying bitterly for the indiscretions of early youth, and that the wife was of the "unco guid" order—unable to forget or forgive.

And then, quite suddenly, De Grouchy confided to this stranger a tale that was *not* the property of the town crier—a difficulty that no one else knew of; a bit of sheer bad luck which, as he ruefully remarked, could only have befallen such an unlucky chap as himself.

Why did he confide in a chance acquaintance? Was he prompted by mad recklessness—there was undoubtedly a vein of insanity in the family—or was the confession not so much a matter of impulse as it appeared, but rather a bold stroke to

win this man's aid? It is hard to say, for De Grouchy was never quite simple—he posed even to himself. One thing at any rate is certain, he was never mistaken in his man. He had betrayed, but he had never been betrayed. He knew where to trust, although he was not particularly trustworthy. He possessed, indeed, many of the qualities of a leader, and it was difficult for any one who had enjoyed his society to think ill of him.

His character was a riddle hard to solve, and it is doubtful if he ever attempted to pass judgment on himself. Possibly he was born wanting in some moral sense that the normal person possesses. He was dashingly brave, and yet he could act like a cur. He was clever, and yet he had thrown away more chances than the fool ever gets. He had loved one woman well enough to risk his life for her, but never well enough to refrain from well-nigh ruining that which he had saved.

The story which he told Mr. Knight was not a particularly edifying one, and he seemed to make no sort of excuse for himself. Nevertheless he cut a better figure in it than would have been the case if any one else had told it; and when he laughed ruefully over the bit of bad luck at the end, that was "so deucedly unlucky," the listener was almost forced, out of common fairness, to take sides with one whom Fortune treated so scurvily.

De Grouchy was one of the people who arrive in the nick of time for an adventure. He had once saved a man from a tiger. His promptitude had prevented a terrible railway accident. He was the hero of a grateful family, whose only son he had rescued from drowning, and, whatever his failings, he was unaffectedly modest about these feats. His quick wits were always on the alert, and his physical courage was undeniable, and a matter of course. Five years before his meeting with Mr. Knight he was staying in Normandy in the Château d'Aigrepines. It was the year when the château caught fire and was all but burnt to the ground. He was the first to give the alarm, and had it not been for him there would have been considerable loss of life. It was De Grouchy who had seized on the readiest way of escape, who had got the children

safely out of the nursery, and who had finally saved Mademoiselle du Clos's life at the risk of his own.

Mademoiselle du Clos was the music mistress, and her room was in the left turret of the old building. The winding staircase was enveloped in flames before the girl awoke to her danger, and there was no way of reaching her window from below, because the tower was planted on the edge of a sheer cliff. She had been forgotten in the panic until the remembrance of her flashed across De Grouchy. He succeeded in climbing over the roof to the top of the tower, and in dragging Mademoiselle up by an improvised rope. She was lithe and very active. She could spring like a cat, and excitement steadied rather than upset her nerve. He took her over the smouldering rafters to the one spot from which escape was possible, and they scrambled down by the ivy from which sleep-drugged bats were blunderingly whirling. The palms of their hands were raw, and their faces were blackened with smoke when they at last stood together in safety, but De Grouchy had thrilled at the proud courage of her smile and the steadiness of her voice.

"I should have been burnt to a cinder had you not helped me, and I do not at all wish to die before even I have lived," she had said in her rather slow, carefully pronounced English.

It was a pity that the story had not ended at that idyllic point, when both man and woman had shown their finest side, but, alas! they played with fire again, and this time Mademoiselle du Clos suffered, though she kept her own counsel, and even her good name.

She spent two ecstatic months in a far-away Brittany fishing village with her English lover. No one knew where or with whom she was. She had no near relatives. Her employers did not trouble their heads about where she spent her holidays—indeed, she was apt to resent any too intimate expression of interest. At the end of the three months De Grouchy left her and returned to quarrel with his wife, and to plunge deeper into debt, and Mademoiselle awoke from the ecstasy to find herself in a dry and arid place, from which, this time, was no deliverance save by her own wit.

De Grouchy did not dwell on this aspect of the case. He was telling his tale, not hers. A child was born to them in the March of the following year, and he sent money to the mother. He wrote a letter that was again quite lover-like. He was not, he said, one of those cold-blooded brutes who will let a woman suffer any privation, and who will throw her off in her hour of need. He offered to cross the Channel to see her. Mademoiselle accepted his money in a curt note, but refused to see him.

"The little girl is yours as much as mine, therefore it is only just that you should pay your share towards keeping her fed and clothed and lodged," she wrote; "but I am not yours any longer. I was mad, but now I am sane, and shall never be mad any more."

That, he considered, was the end of that episode; but alas! the Fates have a way of harking back on some bygone sin that we have really had more than enough of, of dunning for payment of bills that we would feign consider cancelled. Four years passed, during which he heard nothing of Anne du Clos. Four years during which he lived hard, so that the very memory of her was almost crowded out of his mind. At the end of that time he suddenly determined to pull up short, to reform, to live on his own estate, and to be reconciled to his wife. No one quite knew what led him to these virtuous resolutions. Perhaps he felt the chill frost of age touch his blood. However that may be, his wife hailed the first signs of reformation with a joy that came near to being its own undoing. She was a Roman Catholic, and she fervently believed that his soul would be given to her prayers.

De Grouchy could not stand Emma's rejoicing, but he was in earnest in his desire to reform. He left his wife to fast and pray with renewed hope, and betook himself to his long-neglected estate in the North, with intent to see whether it would be possible to live in one wing of the Yellow House, to let the shooting, and to manage the land himself.

On his arrival he found the letter which swept away all his excellent intentions. It was a letter from Anne du Clos. The child who was his and hers was a heavy burden on her;

she wished to cut herself aloof from all connection with the past. The time had come when she felt that she must so free herself. A rich maiden lady was eager to adopt the little girl, and Anne had given her consent. She believed that she had done the best thing possible for all concerned, but it was necessary that she should formally renounce all claim on Jeronime.

"As for me, I never claimed anything! I am sure she has had it all her own way from the beginning!" he said wrathfully. "And good Heavens! what are some women made of? I am not particular, but to sell her own flesh and blood——"

He paused for a moment. Odd though it may seem, he was genuinely shocked. Then the funny side of the predicament struck him, and his blue eyes sparkled with amusement.

"The queer part of it is that the pernicious, meddling old fool turns out to be my next-door neighbour! There's a trick for you! My next-door neighbour! Well, the game's up, then. I am not meant to reform. The next page never *is* clean when I turn it over. It is always blotted in advance. The fact of the matter is, the devil holds too many of my I O U's. I came here with the best intentions (and perhaps my wife would have pulled us through—she is good at economizing), but I can't bring her here while Anne's brat is sitting on the old maid's lap next door!"

"Next door is two miles off," said Mr. Knight.

"The parks join, and Emma is set on making converts," said De Grouchy grimly. "If I could sell the place I might have a chance yet, but no one will buy it." Then he changed the subject. "I have bored you enough with my own affairs. I don't know why! Would you like to have a look at the billiard-room? It is in the more modern wing of the house, but I believe the ceiling is supposed to be worth seeing?"

"Yes. It is an Inigo Jones," said Mr Knight.

He did not know much about billiards, but he already knew more about the glories of the old house than did its owner.

The billiard-table was lit by a swinging oil lamp, and it grieved Mr. Knight to observe that the ceiling had been injured.

De Grouchy was a fine player, and after a few strokes his antagonist put down his cue. "You have too much the better of me, sir," he said. "I do not play well enough to make any game for you."

"Shall we try cards?" asked De Grouchy. Then, with his quick, whimsical smile, he added, "It was in this very room that my forefather played with Sir Everard Cardew, and lost his estate and his wife to the West Countryman. Shall we play for the Yellow House and all it contains against fifteen thousand pounds, eh?"

Mr. Knight looked keenly at his host. De Grouchy's handsome face was alight with excitement. Perhaps the wild suggestion was flung out not quite in joke, for the gambling fever was in his veins. Mr. Knight smiled quietly, and shook his head. He was no Sir Everard. He had never in his life hankered after another man's wife, and the curious suggestion of a repetition of situation only tickled his fancy by its absurdity.

"Are you really thinking of selling? What figure do you put on the estate?" he asked. He added, with a touch of dignity, "I hope that there is no need to say that I should not ask such a question out of mere idle curiosity."

De Grouchy flung down his cue, and stared with a surprise that was half acted, half real.

"Have I been entertaining an angel unawares?" he cried. "Are you actually wanting a dilapidated, ghost-haunted old place?"

The apparent frankness with which he showed his hand made his new acquaintance smile.

"You should never depreciate your own wares," he remarked. "The park might certainly be in better order, but these fine old walls do not show any signs of dilapidation, do they?"

"Oh! the house? Well, to tell the truth, that needs new frocks," said De Grouchy, "New papers, and carpets, and curtains, and all that kind of thing." He did not mention that it also needed an entirely new system of drainage, that

he roof was out of repair, and that the servants' quarters were uninhabitable.

Then he made a sudden plunge into business, and the two men talked till the small hours. Mr. Knight had the air of a substantial man, and something of the decision that is given by a long habit of command. Mr. de Grouchy was essentially unbusinesslike, yet (though matters were not, of course, concluded that night) it was always supposed, and I think rightly, that De Grouchy got an uncommonly high price for that house, and that Mr. Knight had to spend the price over again in repairs.

Mr. Knight did not sleep when he at last betook himself to bed, lighted to his room by Vincent, who regarded him with new respect since he had dined with the master. The best bedroom was a stately room, and the tapestry was beautiful, though sadly in need of repair. It was moth-eaten in parts, and Mr. Knight, tired though he was, spent a good hour in examining it.

"It would be a thousand pities to let it go. Some ridiculous idiot will lay hands on it, and have it made as good as new," he said to himself.

He stood by the window and stared out at the park. The easy hospitality with which his intrusion had been met had given him a kindly feeling towards his odd, unfortunate host, yet it was rather of the trees than of De Grouchy that he thought with compunction.

The worst of the storm was over, and the lightning had not touched the oaks, nevertheless they were marked for destruction. A white chalk cross was on the trunk of each of those "Seven Brothers" who stood together on a rise of undulating ground to the north of the house. A black-visaged, hook-nosed little gentleman from London had already been to measure their huge boles. The axe hung over these stalwart brethren by a thread. They had seen the Yellow House in its youth, when its stones were cruder in colour, and when the letters on the parapet were fresh from the hands of the chiseller. They had seen ladies in gay brocade and gentlemen in flowing wigs, and perhaps they knew what small difference clothes

make, and how the same old story repeats itself under a thousand guises, and is ever new as the leaves in spring, and old as the everlasting hills. They were creations meant to last for centuries, but they might be struck down by a pigmy, here to-day and gone to-morrow.

The moon peeped from behind the fast-scudding clouds; she was riding high in the sky. The small hours began to strike; soon the dawn would break. A hare presently scampered across the grass with ears held back. A bird awoke and chirped. Mr. Knight leant out of the window, and drew a deep breath.

"It is a lovable place, and I have no one to hoard for," he said; "I could spend freely on it. I could save those trees. But I am not a man to take sudden fancies, and of course I have not made up my mind yet," and he really thought he had not.

But the branches of the seven brothers rustled rejoicingly. The rising sap might be thrilling them again when Mr. Knight, the little black butcher, and De Grouchy were all in their graves. The glory of the coming spring was in the air, and the shadow of the axe was lifted.

Emma de Grouchy waited eagerly for her husband's return. She weeded while she waited, and tried to school her impatience. It was so likely that he would not come, that he would change his plans, or miss his train. As a rule she determinedly endeavoured to expect nothing from him.

Emma found some support in hard and fast rules, but to-day she broke them, because the spring of the year which was reddening the twigs of the hedge, and stirring everything to new life, affected her too, and something which she had fancied frozen to death woke and moved in her. She had often almost despaired. Life had become to her a difficult and mysterious affair, a dark maze haunted by the sins of the man who should have been her protector. She was not a very clever woman, but she was no fool, and she believed herself to have "no illusions" about James. She clung fast to the ordinances of the faith in which she had been born and bred,

but refrained from confessing her husband's failings, even to her confessor.

She had been in love with De Grouchy, and he had married her for her money. When that fact had dawned on her she had resented it passionately and deeply. Her pride forbade words on the subject, but the dull ache of the injury he had done her had made her a grave woman. De Grouchy's wife was loyal, but Nature had meant her to be tender, and deviations from Nature's plan are apt to entail loss.

Mrs. de Grouchy was a small woman and finely made. Her hair, of which she had an unappreciated wealth, was a dull, soft, mouse-colour. Her eyes were steel grey, and they looked straight and sternly at the world. Her features were small, and the mouth and chin beautifully shaped. She had scarcely any colour, even her lips were rather pale. She was unbecomingly dressed in a snuff-coloured skirt and white cotton blouse, and she wore an uncompromising mushroom-shaped hat, that was tied under her chin with a brown ribband. If there had ever been a spark of coquetry in Emma's nature it had long ago been snuffed out. Her self-respect and refinement kept her neat, but otherwise she did not care a jot how she looked. If James had cared, she would have dressed to please him.

It was the anniversary of her wedding-day. James had forgotten that, but Emma never forgot anything, which was often a pity! Yet as she looked back on eight painful and perplexing years, she felt hope warm her. She distrusted hope, but it whispered that though much had been lost, of late something had been gained.

When, two months ago, James de Grouchy had acquainted her with the desperate state of his finances, she had surprised him by the vigour and cheerfulness with which she had grasped the situation. She had no fear of poverty. She was so thankful that for once he told her the truth, that not the ghost of a reproach passed her lips. James had actually been touched by her courage and forbearance, he had even declared his full intention of taking her advice. They had parted amicably, and she found herself looking forward to his

return with anxious but not altogether despairing anticipation.

Emma had been listening for the sound of the tread of horse's feet, but her husband did not come on horseback. When he pushed open the garden gate she went to meet him, but he stood swinging the gate with his hand, and looking at her rather strangely, as if dazzled by the rays of the sun, though the sun was behind him, shining in her eyes, not in his.

"Why did you not ride up?" said she.

She had become a very undemonstrative person, and seldom greeted any one warmly.

"I had a spill down hill. The poor brute broke his knees. He's done for," said De Grouchy. His voice broke; he was fond of his horses.

Mrs. de Grouchy wished to show some sympathy, but hardly knew how to. The facility with which her husband could express any emotion under the sun, when he chose so to do, had had a curious effect on her. Her loathing of insincerity had made her reticent to the verge of hardness.

"Tea is waiting," she said. She observed that he halted as they walked up the path. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

He took no notice of the question.

"Emma, I believe I'm going to sell the Yellow House," said he.

She was bitterly disappointed. It occurred to her that he had only made a feint of consulting her, that he had never really intended to fall in with the plans which they had discussed so amicably and in such careful detail. It was, alas! very like James to appear to agree with a scheme when he was in the humour to be agreeable, and then to do something diametrically opposed to what he had apparently intended. She said nothing at all, and her silence irritated him, but he did not wish to quarrel with her just then.

"We fully intended to go and live a Darby and Joan existence in a corner of the Yellow House, didn't we?" he remarked apologetically; "you counted on it, eh, Emma? But there is no use in going against the Fates when they've made up their minds. That old lady who traces the pattern

—I can't for the life of me remember her name—has given it an unexpected curve. I'll tell you the whole story presently.'

They went into the house together, and he sat down rather stiffly. Though James de Grouchy had treated his wife badly in some respects, he seldom failed in the smaller courtesies of life. He might tell her lies, but he was usually punctiliously polite, and she noticed with surprise that for once he let her wait on him.

She fetched brandy and soda for him, and presently he pulled himself together and recounted with verve and humour how he had caught Mr. Thomas Knight napping in the blue drawing-room, how old Vincent had condescendingly spoken or the delinquent who was "not one of us," but by no means a bad sort after all, and of how he had invited the fellow to dine and sleep. He repeated their conversation (with judicious eliminations), and led up to the dramatic moment when Mr. Knight had expressed a desire to buy the house. He acted his own start of surprise, and described how he had suddenly come to the conclusion that such a bit of luck was not to be rashly flung away.

To hear de Grouchy tell a story was as good as listening to a play.

"Of course I've not decided on the matter, Emma," he said at last, leaning back rather wearily as he finished the recital, "yet I own to you, that at the back of my mind I believe it *is* written that we shall sell! That man will buy because he's set on it, and I shall let the place go, because I'm so damnably poor and unlucky. It's Fate!" he repeated again, half seriously.

Emma's grave eyes rested on him unmoved. The story was interesting, and to a certain point, and allowing for embellishments, it might be true. She wished that she were not so well aware that other motives than those he had revealed were prompting him.

"Yes," she answered thoughtfully, "you put a good deal down to Fate, but I think you sometimes jog her elbow."

James de Grouchy laughed, though rather on the wrong side of his mouth.

"You are the most suspicious woman I have ever met!" said he. "If the Archangel Michael expressed a desire to visit you, Emma, you'd look severely at him and wonder whether he had ulterior motives that he hadn't thought fit to mention in heaven! Commend me to the saints for——" The laugh died on his lips; they twisted with a spasm of pain.

"My dear! You *are* hurt!" cried Emma.

Her hardness melted, for it was after all only the protective crust of a warm nature that had been abused. James was still the man she loved, though she had learnt that it was impossible to trust him.

"It's nothing! I wrenched myself in getting free of the horse. Don't for goodness' sake make a fuss," said he.

Oddly enough, though he both liked and made use of sympathy on any other score, he never could bear to receive it for a bodily ailment.

"I won't make a fuss, but I'll send for a doctor," said she.

He negatived the idea sharply, the sharpness being unwonted where she was concerned. Yet all that night he lay in pain.

Nothing was apparently wrong, beyond a graze on his left side, where he had fallen on a bit of iron, but when Emma went to him with a rag steeped in arnica he caught her wrist in a feverishly hot grasp.

"Mind, Emma, I won't have you praying for me," he cried.

He held her away from him, so that she could not apply her remedy. His blue eyes seemed to shine in the candle light like blue fire, his hot fingers hurt her.

"I won't have my soul saved at the expense of my body, d'you hear? You're not to suggest to Heaven that I may taste purgatory to avoid hell."

"I only want to ease this unaccountable pain," said Emma. She was more than a little anxious now, though she spoke quietly.

"Promise me, promise me! You're my wife after all!" he persisted.

It was an odd little scene, and she was not sure that he was quite himself. His temperature was very high; she wished she had insisted on having the doctor.

"You're not promising. I daresay you've got God's ear, you've always run so uncommonly straight, but I won't have it," he repeated. "Oh, you think I'm pretending? That this is all part of a plot——"

"No, I don't," she cried. The colour came into her cheek. She very rarely blushed, but she blushed then. "I must have been horribly suspicious and hard. I'll promise anything you like; but let me put on this bandage, James."

His fingers released their grasp. He lay back with a smile. "Oh, I shall be all right again soon," he said more naturally. "But if I am not, just remember I mean to sell. One must draw a line somewhere. I won't have my wife there, with Anne's brat sitting on the old maid's lap next door." He began to laugh, then checked himself. "Ouf—how it hurts me to laugh!"

Emma arranged the bandage with deft fingers. She was very neat-handed. Presently he fell into an uneasy sleep, and slept till dawn.

Emma remained awake thinking gravely. When the grey light crept into the room it seemed to her as if a new epoch as well as a new day had begun.

De Grouchy woke much freer from pain.

"I don't believe there's anything wrong," he declared. "You made rather a to-do last night, didn't you, Emma? with your bandages and your arnica. I suppose you thought I was very bad."

"Yes," said Emma.

He eyed her uneasily. "I've a kind of idea that I was a bit excited. Did I talk nonsense?"

"You seemed unnecessarily afraid of my prayers," said Emma, with a faint smile.

"Oh—pshaw!—I believe I was almost light-headed; I'm all right again. I'm sorry I made an ass of myself."

He looked really ashamed. He had never been ashamed of serious misdeeds, but he hated to cut a foolish figure.

"It didn't matter," said Emma; then with a sudden impulse, she added, "for I am your wife after all."

CHAPTER III

JERONIME sat by the sea and built castles. The sun had set, but the afterglow coloured the wet sand, and made the salt pools, left by the receding tide, pink. Jeronime's round little figure stood out in high relief on the shore. All the other babies had gone home, she was the only one who had not yet been fetched in. She had an oyster-shell in one chubby hand, and she was now scooping out a moat round her castle. When the scooping business was done, she meant to fill her moat with water. It is a comfort that the sea is so inexhaustible. Jeronime looked at the waves and nodded confidentially.

"You wait, sea. I've nearly done digging. I am coming to you in a minute," said she.

The ripple of the waves sounded inviting and friendly, but one must finish one thing at a time, and Jeronime played seriously. She and the sea talked to each other a great deal. The sea had thousands of small playfellows, but there is always room for one more, and it is never tired. Jeronime loved it, and had a hoard of keepsakes that it had given her. She kept these in a wooden box, and turned them over on the sad but happily rare occasions when she was not allowed to go out.

Jeronime was plump and sturdy. She wore a scarlet flannel cap, and her much-scratched legs and arms were bare. She possessed boots and socks, but she always took them off directly she got to the beach, and they were buried in a grave with a bit of seaweed stuck in to mark the place till she had to go home. Her face was round, and she had a dimple in her

chin. Her hair was short and fair and silky. It was very thick, and fluffed out behind her pretty little ears, reminding one of the down of a yellow duckling. Her eyes were set far apart, and they were big, and very soft and candid. They had a violet tinge in them, and though they were beautiful, there was a slight defect in the child's vision. She could see things a long way off, but was slow at seeing what was under her nose. She was born fair, but her forehead and cheeks and neck were alike tanned one healthy brown by the sun-filled air. She built and dug with an intensely purposeful and industrious air. She had never been amused, and consequently knew very well how to amuse herself.

She was about four years old, and her happy days were never long enough for all she had to do on the shore. Indeed, the filling of a moat is in itself a task to satisfy the energy of an infant Hercules.

Jeronime was patient, as people are who live constantly with unhurrying Mother Nature. She trotted backwards and forwards, filling her shell carefully, and conveying the ocean to her private pond, in dribblets of about five drops a journey. Her short legs never wearied, and I feel it impossible to put a limit to the number of journeys she might have made, had not Fate, in the person of an irate old woman, cut short the day's business.

Mère Marthe pounced on her unceremoniously. The shoes and socks were disinterred in violent haste, and she was dragged away, to the accompaniment of a volley of quick-sounding angry words.

Jeronime did not cry, for she had played longer than usual, and she wanted her supper; but however late it might be, or however much her healthy appetite was pricking her, she never would leave the beach before she was obliged to.

"Every day I tell you to come in at sunset, and every day you give me the trouble of fetching you. A whipping is all the supper you need expect! Yes, a good whipping, and then to bed," scolded Mère Marthe.

Jeronime listened just as she would have listened to a furious wind. Mère Marthe's bark was loud, but she never

bit. The child knew perfectly well that her bowl of bread and milk was being kept hot for her by the fire, and that soon she would be sitting in her own little painted chair, with her three-legged stool in front of her, supping comfortably.

They turned their backs on the sea; it was grey and cold now, and the surge of the long waves was beginning to have that mysterious night-sound in it that made Jeronime's eyes grow round with pleasurable excitement. She always fancied that if she could steal down to the sea at night, it would talk in a different key. When she awoke she liked to fancy that her little cot was floating miles away from land, and that if she were to stare up she might see stars. She could sometimes fancy she smelt the salt, and she would hold her breath till the beating of her pulses was like the sound of water in her ears. She never quite outgrew that fancy, and the influence of her big playfellow on her character was strong. The child who has played with the sea has an idea of strength and breadth that the city-bred misses. It is good to have filled our oyster-shells from the ocean, and to have dabbled baby fingers in the tide that smooths away castles.

The shore sloped up to and was flanked by the city walls, and there was a narrow walk all along the ramparts. Jeronime and Mère Marthe paused on the walk, that Jeronime might put on her shoes and socks; then they went down the steps on the other side, and made their way to that part of the town where the shops are. It was a beautiful old town, strange and quaint and full of surprises. There were long, narrow streets, paved with cobble-stones, down which donkeys came stepping gingerly. On either side of the street treasures were heaped in baskets, and you could buy red and blue china cocks, and silver saints, and rosaries and coloured kerchiefs and *bénitiers* Jeronime had never a sou to spend, so the lust of buying did not possess her. She trotted up the street after Mère Marthe, with her small mind intent on supper. An English girl meeting the glance of her star-like eyes, cried, "Oh, Mary, look at that comical little darling."

But the little darling knew that all the English are mad, and paid no heed.

Mère Marthe and Jeronime were both nearly as broad as they were long, and their clothes were cut after the same pattern. Both wore full short skirts and stout boots, but Mère Marthe wore a flapping white cap instead of an embroidered scarlet one.

Mère Marthe's face was thin and hatchet-shaped. Her black eyes were sharp and restless as a squirrel's, but Jeronime's were placid and dreamy. Mère Marthe lived over a second-hand furniture shop in a busy street, and kept an eye on her neighbours' as well as on her own concerns. Jeronime lived in another world and knew nothing about her neighbour. She returned to this planet when she was hungry, and sometimes on Sunday, when she was taken to mass, for she loved music and the smell of incense, but as a rule she was tiresomely absent-minded. Perhaps it was by reason of this last trait that the Fates so often took her by surprise. More than once on her way through life she was startled by the unexpected. Her eyes were apt to be fixed on the distant horizon, and the premonitory shadow of coming events was often unnoticed.

Mère Marthe had been crosser than usual all the week; she was always cross when a visit from Jeronime's mother was impending, but Jeronime was astonished when she found "Maman" waiting for her at home.

"Maman" was standing by the wood fire warming her slender foot by its blaze; she turned to look at her little girl, but did not run to meet her—she was not a demonstrative mother.

"Marthe allows you to be out too late, *petite*," said she, "I fear she spoils you; but come now and say, 'How do you do?' to me."

Jeronime put her finger in her mouth and stared.

Mademoiselle du Clos possessed an exquisite voice, and she spoke with a singularly fine and clear pronunciation. Jeronime's ear was charmed and her attention arrested, but she listened to the sound rather than to the words. She was accustomed to Marthe's *patois*, and was slow to understand pure French.

Mademoiselle made an impatient gesture.

"It surprises me that a child of mine should be so *bête*," said she. "But come here and eat your supper by my side. "I am hungry! At least you and I have a good appetite in common."

Logs were piled on the open hearth, and Jeronime's bread and milk was hanging in a pot suspended from a tripos. It smelt invitingly. A table was set with coffee and bread. Mademoiselle du Clos seated herself in a wooden rocking-chair on one side of the table, and Jeronime drew her stool to the other side, and planted her own china bowl firmly between her chubby knees.

She was deliberate in her movements and she still stared wide-eyed. Mère Marthe, muttering to herself, filled her nurseling's bowl, and withdrew to a corner, where she continued to grumble like a distant thunderstorm.

"Maman" was slim and upright as a sapling, and she had the distinction that goes farther than beauty. Her years numbered five-and-twenty, but in mind and character she was not young. Her plain black dress fitted her like a glove, she was capable to her finger-tips, and put on her clothes (as she did most things) well. She had a clever and mobile face; her black eyebrows met; her red-brown eyes were long and narrow, rich in colour, and very brilliant. Her complexion was rather pale, but clear and healthy; her black hair was fine and soft and grew low on her forehead.

There was not much likeness apparent between mother and daughter, but Jeronime, when she grew older, inherited Mademoiselle du Clos's melodious accents, perhaps she also inherited some obstinacy.

Mademoiselle du Clos fixed her bright eyes thoughtfully on Jeronime, and a tiny sigh escaped her lips. She was a woman who seldom sighed, for, as she remarked, she needed all her breath to bring her ships into port.

"It is nice to play all day by the sea, is it not?" said she.

"*Oui*, Maman."

"But at this rate you will learn nothing that other children learn. You will be a little stupid always. Is is not true?"

"*Oui*, Maman."

"You do not wish to be a little stupid always, do you?"

"*Oui*, Maman."

The moist baby lips parted, the sweet baby voice replied dutifully at intervals between the spoonfuls, but Jeronime's interest was centred on her bread and milk.

Mademoiselle frowned, and then laughed.

"The stomach comes first!" cried she. "We will satisfy that, and afterwards we will converse."

They finished eating in silence, then she took Jeronime on her knee and sighed again.

Jeronime was astonished. She sat stiffly upright, with her dimpled hands clasped in front of her.

"Now listen," said Mademoiselle. "There is a kind English lady who wants to have a little girl to teach. I cannot have you with me, and I cannot teach you because I have no time, and because—*enfin*, there are many reasons. Would you not like to go in a big steamer to England?"

Jeronime nodded. "*Oui*, Maman," but after a moment she added, "I and Mère Marthe will go."

"But Mère Marthe is too old for such a journey. I must take you myself, *petite*."

"I don't want to go," said Jeronime.

"But you love boats," persisted Mademoiselle du Clos with unusual gentleness, "and sailors, and the sea. Well, you will be in a very big boat, and you will have a funny little bed on board, and you will hear the noise of the waves all night."

Jeronime's dimples showed again.

"Oh, I should like that very much!—but Mère Marthe must go too."

"And when we get to England," said Mademoiselle du Clos ignoring the last remark, "we shall meet the kind lady"—she coloured, and her voice faltered—"and she will be very fond of you, and will give you pretty frocks, and nice things to eat, and will be a—a true mother to you, *petite*—such as I—cannot be."

Jeronime twisted round and gazed hard at her mother. The black eyelashes looked blacker and shinier than usual; the red-

brown eyes shone strangely. Jeronime was reminded of the way in which pebbles shine when you put them at the bottom of a pool of salt water.

She pointed solemnly.

"Why, your eyes are *wet*," she said slowly.

Mademoiselle put her down and jumped up.

"It is impossible to make the child attend! Marthe, you must tell her."

"Not I," said the old woman grimly from her corner, "not I! I am a poor woman, Mamselle. I have no learning; I cannot choose the fine words to dress up such an ugly meaning. But it is time the child was in bed. If you sell her to-morrow she must be looking her best!"

She crossed the room and carried Jeronime off. The child did not kiss her mother good-night, but that did not disturb her. Her mind was full of visions of a big boat.

"But you must go too," she said, when Mère Marthe tucked her up. "I will not go without you."

Mademoiselle du Clos sat alone by the hearth, and thought with compressed lips. It is hard to walk over new-made graves, and this, she admitted to herself, was her bad hour.

You had but to look at her to know that she was a woman of determination and character. She had made a false step in early youth, but she would never again be betrayed by her affections. She would slip no farther down that hill; on the contrary, she meant to fight her way up, and to bury her mistakes so deep that they should call to her no more. She believed that possible; she believed that in the course of time she should quite forget, though at the present moment there was pain and struggle in her heart. And through the pain she cried to expediency, to outward respectability, to ambition. Her soul said to the darkness, "Be thou my light," *not knowing what it did.*

Presently she counted out a slender store of money, and laid it in her lap till Marthe should return. She was angry when she remembered the old woman's words. There was no question of selling, that of course would be horrible. She did not quite see the peasant's point of view; she could not

understand why Marthe, who had looked with the utmost leniency on the absence of a wedding-ring, should be so shocked now.

Mademoiselle du Clos had herself felt often horribly ashamed, but then *she* was ashamed of Jeronime's existence.

When Marthe came back, Mademoiselle offered the money.

"It is rather more than the sum we agreed I should pay for the child's board, but you have taken very good care of her," she said.

Marthe liked money, and the remuneration seemed to her handsome. She turned the coins over on her broad palm, and her quick little eyes glistened. Then suddenly she thrust it back into Mademoiselle's lap.

"*Tiens!* It is not for me—I will not have it," she said.

Mademoiselle sprang to her feet, and the scattered coins rolled away in all directions. She was very angry, but she had so trained herself to self-control that wrath tied rather than loosened her tongue, and Marthe got the first word.

"*Mon Dieu!* are we not two women?" said she, "and shall I who have borne three sons—and they lie under the sea—drive another to forsake her flesh and blood? Why then when I die, our Blessed Lady, with her little Christ in her arms, may turn away her head, and say no word for poor old Marthe."

"You make a foolish mistake," said Mademoiselle coldly. "I am not so poor that I cannot pay my debts. Neither do I intend to sell Jeronime as you absurdly imagine. At the same time I am not rich, and with this baby clinging to my skirts I cannot rise. Would it be good for us that I should sit for ever at the bottom of the ladder in order that I should keep her on my knee? No! Let us both have our chance—the child as well as myself. English girls are happy and well brought up. This lady is rich and of good position. Jeronime will have a more fortunate girlhood than ever I had."

"A child eats, and she has to be clothed," said Marthe. 'That is why the poor mothers leave their babies in the basket outside the convent over there. I can understand

that. But your little one is fat enough, she does not cry for food; and if Mamselle finds the times too hard, I will feed her for less money, and she shall yet get no thinner."

"I am not trying to beat down your wages," said Mademoiselle. Her expression hardened, for the old woman's obstinacy roused her own. "It is my own affair, and I will hear no more about it. You had better pick up the silver, Marthe."

"I will pick it up, but I will not keep it," said Marthe, crossing herself. "I do not take these wages from you, Mamselle. Oh yes, you smile because I have taken them these four and a half years, ever since the baby was born, and I knew all the time you were no wife. That is true, but then I thought you were a mother, and *le bon Dieu* Himself does not refuse to give the milk, even where there is no ring on the finger. 'Who is her father?' says one. 'The father of us all,' say I, and I make haste to have her christened, that at least there may be no mistake about *that*. But now—now you go against Him."

Marthe's rugged old face was beautiful with earnestness, but when Mademoiselle du Clos shrugged her shoulders and smiled, as one who would say, "There is no arguing with a fool," then her black eyes blazed with sudden fury.

"Ah, you stand and look down on me and smile—you!" she cried. "You talk grand talk about a fine English lady who will bring up your child, and a ladder that you will climb. Bah! What has a fine lady to do with your baby? And who climbs up by sinning? It is down to hell that that road leads. But it all means one thing, my woman, one thing! You do not care for your child, no, not so much as the old goat outside cares for her kid, and for that you are a bad one, Mamselle! See, the other I could understand—you were young, and who knows? The man had a handsome face and a lying tongue, perhaps; but this—this is the wickedest sin of the two—and you are not even starving!"

Mademoiselle opened her lips to speak, but shut them again without replying. Of what avail was argument? Marthe was absolutely unreasonable. You cannot argue against an instinct.

"I have decided," she said at last, and so went into the inner room where she was to sleep that night beside little Jeronime, and shut the door.

Jeronime was sleeping peacefully. Mademoiselle stood by the side of the wooden cot and looked at the fluffy head which peeped out of the blanket.

Once more her tears (which had been dried by anger) welled up, but she would not, perhaps she could not, reverse her decision. There comes a moment when we feel that conflict is over, when we know that our souls have taken a side for good or evil; when a door is in truth shut, not by outward circumstances, but by irrevocable choice

CHAPTER IV

MISS MERRIDAN has already been introduced to the reader by Mr. de Grouchy, as "a pernicious old fool," but Mr. de Grouchy had not the honour of personal acquaintance with the lady, and it is but fair to say that his description of her was prompted by prejudice.

Miss Merridan was not old. At the time when this story begins she was but thirty years of age, and she was still an elegant and striking woman. She was the only child of a rich, elderly couple, who, after a union of fifteen years, had given up the hope of being blessed with children. The advent of a daughter had been hailed by them with a joy that was pathetically absurd in some of its manifestations.

Lucilla Merridan's parents idolised and lived for her. They tried to satisfy her every whim, and as she grew from a spoilt child into a spoilt woman, they never ceased in their blundering endeavours to encompass their darling's happiness and to sedulously guard her from those rougher winds which carry health.

In her girlhood Lucilla was considered both clever and beautiful. She sang rather well, she drew badly, and she dabbled freely in philosophy and literature, to the wondering admiration of her two most devoted slaves. She had other admirers than her old father and mother, but none who were as blindly and disinterestedly devoted to her.

But Lucilla did not marry. Her father was terribly afraid of fortune-hunters, and it is doubtful whether he would have considered any possible suitor good enough for his wonderful ewe lamb. Lucilla herself was extremely exacting. She

demanded a great deal in a lover, and it was perhaps hardly her fault that she had an inordinately high opinion of her own value.

"Don't be in any hurry! I haven't yet seen the man who is fit to tie up your pretty shoes, my pet," her old father would cry, and though she laughed, Lucilla privately agreed with him.

Mr. Merridan's fear of fortune-hunters made him undertake his daughter's education in matters of business, and he found her an apt and quick pupil. Lucilla learnt a great deal about stocks and shares and investments, and was proud of her knowledge. When her father went to the bank she always accompanied him, and was an object of hopeless admiration to three of the clerks. Mr. Merridan banked with Parkyns and White, as his father and grandfather had before him, and he carefully impressed on Lucilla that when he was dead she must stick to the old bank, and that she must not "go putting her money into new-fangled concerns." Lucilla solemnly promised to remember all his injunctions, for she was fond of her father.

Mr. Merridan fancied that he had made his girl so good a business-woman that she might safely be trusted to take care of her own money. She inherited her abilities, which were showy rather than reliable, from the old man, and she was fonder of him than of her mother, who was a clinging, gentle soul, with a talent for loving. In the course of time Mr. Merridan died, blessing Lucilla with his last breath, and his wife moped and pined like a deserted lovebird, and followed her mate within the year.

On her mother's death Lucilla Merridan chose to consider that she was alone in the world, and she mourned passionately, and with a sense of injury. Her least wish had always been considered; it gave her a moral shock to meet with Death, who is no respecter of persons. She had been in the habit of believing that the old lady, though fond, was so much her ntellectual inferior as to be incapable of understanding her; yet she missed the faithful and admiring affection to which she had been accustomed, and she became ill from constant

fretting. She was left with an immense deal of money (though she was poor in those qualifications which make for contentment), and there was nothing in the world to prevent her from eating her heart out. Her bodily symptoms began to have a fatal fascination for her. She had always been a highly nervous and rather delicate woman, but probably the strongest constitution would have suffered from the amount of attention she bestowed on hers.

During the three years that followed her parents' death she drifted into something very like chronic invalidism. Her well-appointed flat in London did not give her much occupation; she wearied of concerts and lectures, she became profoundly distrustful of men (too many of them proposed to her fortune), and she lost her youthful looks and her freshness. It was on her thirtieth birthday that she first met Dr. Wallace MacIlvert, then at the zenith of his fame, and nearer a fall than any one guessed; and it was that same clever and enterprising doctor who, three months later, discovered the right prescription for her on the last page of an equally enterprising magazine.

The prescription ran as follows: "For adoption, a little girl, aged four and a half years; gentle birth on both sides; perfectly healthy; excessively pretty, violet eyes and curly, fair hair. All particulars given in strict confidence. If adopted all claim will be resigned."

Lucilla Merridan had never been especially fond of children, but she had a great craving for possession. From the moment that the magazine was put into her hands she longed to possess this baby girl. Difficulties only increased her desire: she was not accustomed to being thwarted, waking or sleeping she dreamt of nothing else. The effect on her health was excellent. She forgot to be ill; the new interest was literally new life to her. Dr. MacIlvert had reason to congratulate himself on the cure he was effecting. He was a man who had many enemies, and he was sometimes called a quack and sometimes an adventurer, but undoubtedly he had a knack of curing his patients. He undertook all the necessary investigations concerning the "excessively pretty" little maid, who

had poked her rash little nose into a world where she was too evidently undesired.

Dr. Wallace MacIlvert's practice was in London, and it was in London that Miss Merridan had met him, but he already knew a good deal about her, and was aware of the locality and extent of her property near Durham. Indeed she was apt to treat her doctor as a confessor, and to consult him on many subjects, on the ground that anything that interested her had some effect on her health.

"From the moment that the dear little thing comes under my roof she will be entirely my child," said Miss Merridan.

The doctor nodded acquiescence, though he was, in truth, rather amused by her last remark. No power of wealth could make that sturdy, broad-browed child whom he had been to see Miss Merridan's. One cannot buy motherhood for gold any more than one can buy love or faith, or any other of the things that are most worth having, but it was not his business to discourage his patient.

"I have made that clear," he said. "The mother is as eager as you can be to cut the connection effectually. She has managed very cleverly; none of her acquaintance have had the slightest suspicion of the child's existence. She is a young woman of iron nerve."

"Is the little girl affectionate? Are you sure that she will love me?" asked Miss Merridan eagerly. "But of course I must judge of her disposition when I see her; I can always read character at a glance. How I long for the moment when we shall meet. But, oh, Doctor! what a terrible blow it would be to me now if this plan were to fall through. I do not think I could bear such a disappointment!"

She was sitting upright, with her thin hands clasped on her knee. Her fine black eyes were feverishly bright, and there was a spot of colour on either cheek. She was, the doctor observed to himself, too excited this afternoon, but then but a month ago she had been lying on the sofa, weary of life, sick with soul-sickness. The swing of the pendulum was a little rapid, but nevertheless her improvement was marked.

"Four o'clock on Monday is the time arranged for the

interview. Mademoiselle du Clos will herself bring the child to your house, and I will, if you desire it, witness the final arrangements."

"But Monday is too far off, and every hour makes me more impatient," she cried. "Can we not telegraph to them to come sooner? I can so easily make it worth the woman's while to oblige me. Of course, I know how valuable your time is, dear Doctor; but you must hold me responsible for any loss—you must let me write you a cheque, and fill it up as you see fit."

He shook his head with a pleasant laugh. He was not an over-scrupulous person, but he knew better than to accept blank cheques from his patients.

"No, no," he said; "four o'clock on Monday it must be. I never put off my engagements for the sake of money, my dear lady—only for the sake of life."

She gave him her hand petulantly. At thirty Miss Merridan still occasionally behaved like a spoilt girl; then she relented, for the doctor had a good deal of influence over her.

"What a tyrant you are!" she cried, with the smile that was still charming. "But I forgive you, for you will have given me happiness."

The doctor smiled sympathetically. Miss Merridan believed him to be singularly sympathetic, and he was at least singularly acute. He probably knew as well as any one that no man can give happiness to the woman who is still restlessly seeking it for herself, when her girlhood is gone.

"Ah, if I could dispense *that*, other drugs would be at a discount," he said.

He smiled again, but less kindly, when the hall door had closed behind him and he was walking through the square.

Yes, indeed, if one could serve joy out in bottles and pills, one would have the world at one's feet—that sick world that crowds so pathetically round the veriest pretender who but professes to possess that water which quenches thirst.

Dr. Wallace MacIlvert was a much talked-of person that season, for he had had a striking success in the case of the Duchess of ——'s only girl. It was said that the Duchess

herself would do anything for him, and she expressed her gratitude and admiration on every occasion. Though it may be true that he was something of a charlatan, it is also true that he had a real gift for moral and mental diagnosis which was wonderfully delicate and acute. He always knew what his patients wanted, though he was aware that he could often only supply a palliative in place of a remedy. Miss Merridan had wanted an interest in life, and he had grasped that fact before she had got a quarter through the account of her symptoms. The baby girl he had found did interest her for the time—and afterwards? Well, as for the afterwards, a half-formed notion was at the back of his mind, but there was no hurry.

The doctor was a strongly-built man, but little past the prime of life. His hair, which was reddish in hue, was parted in the middle. His forehead was low and broad. He had bright blue eyes, with fair eyelashes. His jaw was rather long, which would have been more noticeable had he been clean shaved, but he wore a short, pointed beard. He was of very mixed nationality. His grandfather had been a rather noted Scotch divine and a strict Calvinist, who, in spite of the divinity and the Calvinism, had become entangled in some rather questionable speculation, and had consequently emigrated to America. His father had been born and bred under the stars and stripes. His mother had been Irish. The doctor himself had a touch of the brogue, and could recount a story like an Irishman, but he had an eye to the main chance like his Yankee father. He was a sceptic, but it would be rash to say that no drop of the Calvinistic blood was in his veins. He studied his note-book as he walked along. The next case on his list was addicted to morphia. Dr. MacIlvert had been making inquiries into the family history, and he shook his head over it. He had a strong personal influence over weak-minded and weak-willed people, and had had a good deal of success in cases of a like nature, but in this instance his intuition told him that he should fail.

"There is nothing to get a grip on. It is a foregone conclusion," he said to himself.

Many years before, his grandfather, walking through the wyndes of old Edinburgh, with his Bible in his hand, had pointed sternly at a man and woman who had reeled drunkenly across his way. He had been a popular preacher, but he spoke no word to the disgraceful couple.

"*They* are vessels appointed to destruction," he had said.

Grandfather and grandson had alike been keenly interested in the pursuit of their respective callings, and, for all their boldness, they both knew their limitations, and cannily avoided failure.

Dr. MacIlvert determined to refuse to undertake this especial patient. He openly gave out that where he felt he could be of no use he would not prescribe. The regular practitioners were (and with justice) furious with him; but at present he could afford to snap his fingers at them. Miss Merridan was but one of many striking instances of his acuteness, and he did not tell her that it was an idea alone that had cured her.

Jeronime was brought to London in due time, and was given away in a luxurious London drawing-room.

Miss Merridan was charmed. The fair, fluffy hair and violet-tinged eyes took her fairly by storm, and she was pleased that the daughter did not in any way resemble the mother.

Dr. MacIlvert was present, and kept the two women to the point. He noticed that Miss Merridan took the sentimental, and the real mother the hard and businesslike *rôle* throughout the interview.

"The child shall be first in my affections, the first object of my life, and my dearest treasure," said Lucilla Merridan earnestly.

She held out her arms to the little one, who clung to her mother's skirts, stuffing her fingers into her mouth and looking with frightened eyes from one stranger to the other.

Mademoiselle du Clos shrugged her shoulders. For her part she could not comprehend this lady. Why did she not marry, since she had such a hankering after babies? Why did she want other people's children? Mademoiselle du

Clos's observant, narrow eyes appraised the Englishwoman coldly. Miss Merridan was too thin, certainly, and perhaps too intense for some people's taste, but she was not so old yet; and she was magnificently dressed. The room, too, showed that she had heaps of money.

"Jeronime will be fortunate," she said drily; but apparently Jeronime was not of that opinion, for she began to cry.

Dr. MacIlvert picked the child up in his arms and carried her off to the window to prevent her interrupting the conversation. She wriggled vigorously, and thumped his broad chest with her soft clenched fists, much to his amusement. He rather liked healthy babies, and he approved of the amount of energy she displayed.

Mademoiselle du Clos settled matters as expeditiously as might be to the tune of Jeronime's sobs. Perhaps it was something which old Marthe had said which set some words from a book she did not often read running in her head—"What thou hast to do, do quickly." She could not meet Jeronime's bewildered look; she hurried through the interview with a haste that seemed almost brutal. Miss Merridan took a great aversion to the keen, handsome Frenchwoman; she drew back with instinctive dislike when Mademoiselle du Clos by chance touched her, and if the latter had been the sort of person who acts on impulse, she would have changed her mind at that moment and have carried Jeronime off again.

On the other hand, had the child been ugly there is little doubt that she might have been returned to old Marthe and the sea shore, for a time at least. As it was, she was suddenly transplanted and bidden bloom in a new atmosphere and take root in new soil, and both women said to themselves, "At least there is no doubt that the transaction is for the child's good."

It may easily be imagined that, whether for ultimate good or not, the child suffered dumbly from the strangeness of her new surroundings. She had been accustomed to an out-of-doors life, and to a certain amount of wholesome neglect. During the first few months of her sojourn in London her new guardian never let her out alone, and the atmosphere was

morally, as well as physically, too close. Miss Merridan had many theories, and she tried them all on her new *protégée*. It must be allowed that she spared neither trouble nor expense, yet Jeronime was frankly and apparently miserable.

Miss Merridan rose early and had breakfast at eight on the child's account. Jeronime ate little because she felt shy, and longed for her own earthenware bowl and three-legged stool. After breakfast Miss Merridan tried to teach her to read on the phonetic system, which was just then in vogue, and was a little impatient at finding her incurably inattentive. They had a strictly vegetarian lunch at noon; and after lunch Jeronime was dressed up and taken for a drive. Her clothes were a source of interest to her guardian, and of misery to herself. She had wept when her old frock was carried away, and she hated the pretty new white one that was given to her. She was a very conservative little girl, who cordially distrusted everything that was strange.

Miss Merridan took her to see all her friends, who tried to be politely interested in "Lucilla's last craze."

"A child," Miss Merridan said, "is the surest safeguard against gossip. *I* do not wish to hear anything that is unfit for my little girl's ears. Society would be the purer if it kept the children always in its midst."

"But how about the children?" one old lady asked bluntly. She had been a friend of Miss Merridan's mother, and she sometimes took liberties. "That baby girl looks perfectly mazed, Lucilla! Either she is half idiotic, or else you are dragging her about till she does not know whether she is standing on her head or her heels. She will be having a brain-fever if you don't take care!"

Lucilla was very angry, and she defended her charge warmly from the imputation of idiocy, but nevertheless turned somewhat sharply on her when they re-entered the carriage.

"My darling little Jeronime, do try to say something besides '*oui*' when you are spoken to," she said (in French, for Jeronime would not attend to a word of English). "Are you not happy? What is it that you want?"

"I want Mère Marthe," cried Jeronime. "I want to go

home! I want the sea;" and then she put her knuckles to her eyes and burst into a good, loud, healthy roar.

Miss Merridan was fairly frightened and quite helpless. She would not for the world have slapped Jeronime (which I fear was what Mère Marthe would have done); coaxing was of no avail; reasoning was ludicrously hopeless. The carriage was open, and Jeronime's lungs were excellent. Having fairly started, her pent-up feelings found relief in the vigour of her howls. Perhaps the outburst saved her from brain-fever, but it was a purgatorial drive for the unhappy guardian. The poor lady got quite nervous when they reached the Row, and every one turned round to stare. She shouted to the coachman to go round the other way, but her voice was drowned by Jeronime's. When at last they reached home she summoned the housekeeper, and Jeronime was sent to bed. Then she betook herself to the study of Herbert Spencer on education, but her head ached so that she could not read, and finally she wrote to her doctor.

"I have devoted myself to the child with the greatest tenderness, but she is liable to the strangest outbreaks of temper, and I fear that she is not of so sweet a nature as I at first hoped."

Dr. MacIlvert smiled over the letter, but sympathised with his patient's difficulties, and recommended country air and a homely nurse, who was fortunately obtained. Poor little Jeronime became slowly attached to this woman, but she remained so shy and unhappy in the presence of her adopted mother that Miss Merridan began secretly to fear that her *protégée* had after all somehow inherited "low tastes."

The move to the country made a happy diversion. It brought the colour back to Jeronime's cheeks, and it gave Miss Merridan something fresh to think about. Hollowdene had just been newly decorated, and in the consideration she bestowed on the artistic effects of curtains and furniture, Miss Merridan almost forgot to worry about her less amenable live acquisition. The garden proved a real joy to the little girl, and some of the happiest hours of a not very happy childhood were spent in it. She was perfectly contented when she was

allowed to grub at will in a bit of spare ground that she called her own.

She had a strong taste for solitude, and she made for the wilderness whenever she could, just as she had once made for the sea shore. She was sturdy, and not malleable. She took violent antipathies to certain people, and was never very sociable on first acquaintance with any one, but it was rather her negations than any active naughtiness that were disappointing to her guardian. She had a tiresome trick of trotting off by herself whenever she got the chance. After she had been given "her own garden" she ceased to give so much trouble in this way, but at first she would watch her opportunity with obstinate persistence, and toddle off if her nurse turned her back for a moment. At the bottom of her small mind lay the hope that if she only got far enough she might find the home for which her poor little heart was sick.

Two months after Jeronime's arrival Miss Merridan's intercourse with Dr. MacIlvert was roughly and painfully broken. She had depended greatly on his guidance in this new venture; to some extent she considered him responsible for it, and she had enjoyed penning long analytic descriptions of the adopted child's unfolding nature, moral, mental, and physical.

Dr. MacIlvert was one of those untiringly energetic people who can always find room at their fire for the heating of another iron. He had duly replied, giving terse and decided counsel which bore the hall-mark of common sense and experience. Now, alas! the counsel had perforce to cease, which was unfortunate for Jeronime as well as for her self-constituted guardian.

The celebrated trial of Lady Alice Lennox for the murder of her husband had made it impossible for Dr. MacIlvert to continue his practice in London. Among other side issues, it had first shaken and then stabbed to death Lucilla Merridan's faith in her medical confessor. She refused to read all the unsavoury details of that disgraceful and miserable business, but she had been forced to accept the conclusion that her doctor had come out of the witness-box destitute of reputation.

Despite her fads and cranks and restless cravings, Lucilla Merridan had no liking for dirt. She had trusted Dr. MacIlvert implicitly and in defiance of some warnings, but from the moment that she realised that her trust had been misplaced she was overwhelmed with horror and shame at the thought of her intimacy with him. She burnt his letters, wishing that she could as easily destroy the recollection of them. Everything that reminded her of her quondam friend became distasteful to her. For some weeks she could scarcely bear the sight of the child whom he had found for her.

Dr. MacIlvert called to ask for an interview just before he sailed for America. He seldom left a stone unturned; at almost the last moment he thought of the sentimental, rich, and rather hysterical lady for whom he had provided a saving interest; but Lucilla would not see him. She wondered indignantly that he dared come near her, but possibly an inarticulate instinct warned her that she had better not "dare" receive him.

Life became extremely flat for some time after the doctor's departure. He had never approached anything resembling love-making; she would have taken fright had he done so; but she missed writing to him and she missed his racy comments on men and things. She became very irritable and difficult to please, and for once found no relief in discussing the reason of her sensations. On the contrary, she buried the whole subject in absolute silence and congratulated herself that Jeronime was too young and too stupid to have guessed that anything was amiss.

CHAPTER V

JERONIME'S mother returned to France, having left her child behind her, and entered upon a new era. Up to a certain point she had been an unfortunate woman, but now she flourished like the scriptural green bay-tree. It sometimes seemed to her that, having struck a compact with the devil, he was carrying out his share of the bargain with really commendable zeal.

She had experienced a great deal more grief than she had expected when she had deserted Jeronime, but she sang at a concert on the evening of her arrival in Paris with phenomenal and unexpected success.

The painful business she had gone through left no traces of weariness on her face, but she was certainly excited and perhaps a trifle reckless. She sang with a *verve* that was electrifying; she knew that she was singing herself into fame, into fortune, into all the things on which her mind was hardest set.

The uncomfortable ache at her heart should be turned into account. Anne was fiercely determined to make all her powers, sensations, and feelings push one way. She sang the better because, beneath her triumph, she was unhappy. She was a born artist.

She was always striking, but that night there was an indefinable brilliancy about her that carried away her audience. The storm of applause made her bright eyes brighter. The hall seemed to rock with the noise. Anne's erect, black-robed figure swayed a little in response. She just bowed, but not effusively; she was not in the least grateful.

There was rather a mocking gleam in her long eyes as they glanced at the enthusiastic, clapping rows of people from between their black lashes. Enthusiasm always struck Anne as a trifle ludicrous.

Well, she had conquered this audience. It was a first victory. She was inclined to despise that which she had overcome, and was already thinking what engagements she would accept and refuse on the morrow. It had been a certain elusive quality in De Grouchy's character that had made her fall in love with him. She had never dominated him.

She sang three times, but refused a last encore. The refusal was bold, and offended the great lady who had patronised her and given her her opportunity, but Mademoiselle du Clos knew what she was about and what she could afford to do or leave undone.

Her voice was a pure contralto and it was never strong enough for the opera. In a hall it was perfect. There was an apparent contradiction between the passion in her voice and her own personality, which perhaps added to the attraction she possessed.

That was the beginning of a success that was brilliant but short-lived. Mademoiselle du Clos became the fashion. She was besieged with invitations, social as well as professional. She trebled and then quadrupled the fees she had originally charged her pupils. No one who possessed a merely mediocre fortune could aspire to be taught by her, and she also refused to train an unrepaying voice.

It came about that to be a pupil of "Du Clos" was in itself a distinction, and, to do Anne justice, she never allowed her opinion to be biassed by rank or money. She was too true a musician for that, and perhaps also she was too clever. She knew very well that there is but one way to make one's judgment respected, and that is to make it unbribable. One of the most remarkable facts about her was that she possessed the artistic sense in a high degree, combined with a hard, shrewd faculty for getting on in the world which is not usually vouchsafed to artists.

Her contradictions rendered her alluring, but she held her small, well-shaped head very high. No one (after her first *début*) ventured to patronise Anne—it was she who condescended. She held her own, being very much aware of her value, in spite of the fact that, like most people of strong personality, she had some enemies.

Her social side developed. She was witty as well as beautiful. She had known better than to be witty when she was merely a music-mistress, but she had made her little observations on life even then, and De Grouchy had sharpened and encouraged her talents. She wore her armour constantly! No one ever caught her in a moment of expansion. To tell the truth she was profoundly mistrustful, as well as constitutionally independent.

She had would-be lovers in plenty, but her morals were absolutely unimpeachable. It was known that she was ambitious, and she was expected to make a very grand marriage—but after all she did nothing of the sort.

At the end of two seasons' celebrity her voice failed her.

Perhaps she had worked too hard; perhaps, though healthy, she was not quite so robust as she fancied herself; however that may be, a bad cold on her chest left her voiceless and extraordinarily weary, as well as possessed with a premonition that her day was over. It has been said before that Anne, in spite of her sound sense, was given to premonitions. She faced the situation bravely, and the money she had made was of consolation to her.

Her door was besieged with admirers, she could have stocked a florist's shop with the bouquets she received; to some extent they too were consoling, but they did not give her so sure a satisfaction as her banker's book.

One afternoon she sat surrounded by flowers, and thought very seriously about the future. The future to Anne seemed always a manageable quantity, and something to be moulded by her own firm fingers in spite of occasional mishaps.

Perhaps the scent of the flowers disturbed her, for presently she rose with an odd little smile, swept them all together and put them outside her door.

Old Monsieur Colomb, who mounted, panting slightly, to the third *étage*, stared, astonished at the sweet pyramid of blossoms that was heaped on the marble slab outside Mademoiselle de Clos' sitting-room. He was an inquisitive person, and he could not refrain from asking his hostess why she had banished all her flowers.

Anne answered him with incisive directness, "I do not care about bouquets, nor about what they represent."

Monsieur Colomb respected and admired Anne, but he looked at her inquiringly, "That is strange in so young a woman," he said thoughtfully.

Monsieur Colomb was bourgeois, but very rich. He had a passion for music, and liked to patronise young singers. He had substantially helped more than one musical genius, but was stingy over trifles. He sometimes gave Palais Royal brooches and cheap knick-knacks to his favourites, and he was both laughed at and respected. His friendships were purely platonic, and his criticisms were received with attention.

"You are very remarkable, Mademoiselle," he remarked presently, with a gravity that prevented offence. "Do you never like to be admired?"

"For my music?—yes!" said Anne, "just as much as any other artist likes it. I do not profess to despise the sound of applause."

"But for yourself?" said Monsieur Colomb.

Anne was sitting by a wood fire, for her illness had left her chilly, though the weather was warm. She sat upright as a dart, and her long-fingered hands were clasped on her knee. There was a perceptible pause before she answered.

Monsieur Colomb scanned her face eagerly. He knew little of Anne's self, but he believed in the purity of her life, and he knew its temptations. She was a woman in a thousand! She was sphinx-like too, and a riddle fascinated him.

He edged his chair nearer to her, and she, with her eyes on the fire, heard the movement and recognised that if she chose she could be his promised wife before he left the room. This was not the first time that that knowledge had flashed on her,

but now her brain was busily at work, weighing the pros and cons. She did not look at him yet, but she was absolutely aware of how he looked at her. If she were to marry him, she might grow very tired of his appearance.

Monsieur Colomb was a small man, with a pointed white beard and a white moustache that was waxed and curled at the ends. He had handsome black eyes and bushy eyebrows, which he sometimes twitched to emphasise his words. His cheeks were hollow (he suffered greatly from dyspepsia) and his voice was peevish. He was irritable and nervous, but kind-hearted, and above all things *bon Catholique*—a man who believed in his religion with his whole heart; a good man, whose minor peculiarities would make him difficult to live with, but who was sound at the core. His thin, cracked voice jarred dreadfully on Anne's ear—but if her own voice were irretrievably gone, could she do better? He had money, and perhaps after a winter abroad she might be able to sing again. She would not run into debt, yet she could hardly risk the expense of that winter on her own account.

She weighed and balanced, and all the while she had a curious sensation that it did not matter whether she shaped her life this way or that. She was a practical person and must choose practically—yet one man had been reality to her, and all the rest were passing shadows, and at times she knew it!

"For yourself?" said Monsieur Colomb again. He was a persistent shadow, and her silence made him more eager.

"For myself I should prefer a little respect to a good deal of the sentiment that some people are pleased to call admiration," she said at last.

She was aware that there was a slightly forced and sententious flavour about her speech; it might have been made by Monsieur Colomb himself, and he received it with unqualified approval.

"Your sentiment does you credit, Mademoiselle. *I* at least offer you my most profound respect," he said.

Anne nodded, with the brilliant stage smile that showed her even, white teeth, and that meant nothing.

Monsieur Colomb was stung by a suspicion that she did not believe in his vaunted respect. For so young a woman she was extraordinarily mistrustful; she perhaps put him on a par with those others, who sent bouquets.

He coughed and cleared his throat.

"I am no longer a young man and I have seen a great deal of the world," he began, and paused to emphasise his point with lifted forefinger. "But never, I speak after full consideration, *never* have I met any woman who was at once so virtuous, so gifted, and (if I may say it without impertinence) so beautiful as Mademoiselle du Clos."

Anne shrugged her shoulders.

"I had fancied you were above that kind of thing! You pay me empty compliments—like other men, Monsieur. To tell you the truth I am not sure that these banalities can be said without impertinence."

The old man drew yet a little nearer; her rebuff increased his admiration and brought him to the point.

"I swear to you by the Holy Virgin," he said, with unexpected solemnity, "that there is no thought of you in my heart that is not of purest respect. I am too old to go down on my knees, dear Mademoiselle, yet it is with true reverence that I beg you to consider what I have to offer you. I have watched you from the commencement of your rapid and brilliant success. I was the first to congratulate you, and to prophesy great things for you. My opinion is perhaps not altogether without value—I have seldom been mistaken in a singer. Yet it is not your talent that most attracts me. No! I esteem character above talent, and I am influenced by your independent and grandly proud character."

"*Mon Dieu!*" softly ejaculated Anne. She was amused. It was the funniest declaration she had ever give ear to.

"*I* appreciate it," continued Monsieur Colomb, patting himself approvingly, "and I believe that my appreciative esteem will be of value to you. Also—I am rich—and——" —his voice broke suddenly as he came to the end of his carefully prepared speech—"and I want you to be my wife."

Anne turned her head slowly and looked at him.

The old man struck her as absurd; she was hardly womanly or tender enough to be touched (as a better woman would have been) by his quaint and pompous sincerity. Yet in spite of the absurdity his last words gave her a sharp, unendurable pang. Among the many exquisite, passionate, and beautiful things that Jeronime's father had said to her, one thing had been lacking, he had never once said, "I want you to be my wife."

She pressed her fingers against her eyeballs for a moment; her eyes were not wet, but burning hot. Perhaps she wanted to be rid of the vision of that other man. Then she stood upright and held out both her hands to Monsieur Colomb.

"I cannot pretend to what men call love, *mon ami*," said she; "you will not expect that kind of nonsense from me? It sickens me! I believe that I could make a good wife, but I am not sentimental."

Monsieur Colomb took the two white hands in his, and a chivalrous kindness illumined his wrinkled face as he looked at this woman in the zenith of her beauty, who "could not pretend to what men call love." He himself had been so unfortunate as never to have met love at its purest and best, and he had, alas! too often seen the travesty of it. Yet a dim suspicion crossed his mind that Anne's words were at the least sad and unnatural.

"A lasting affection, such as mine, an affection founded on our mutual esteem, is a far better thing than the passion of youth," said he.

He could not help talking like a copy-book, and Anne smiled brilliantly again. Poor, dry old Monsieur Colomb! I fear it was his money-bags rather than his "lasting affection" that finally weighed with her, but she had a passing qualm of compunction, for though she was a hard woman, she was not altogether wanting in honesty.

"And putting hearts out of the question, I wish to own to you that at the present moment I have not even a voice!" said she. "It is a terrible confession, Monsieur—I have not a note left! I can sing no more than a cat!"

Monsieur Colomb frowned with dismay. He forgot to

press his suit in his real anxiety and perturbation. It may truly be said that he really loved Anne's voice. The round, true quality of her notes was an exquisite pleasure to him.

"And I do not wonder at it!" he cried irritably. "You have been culpably foolish, Annie! I've told you so before. Your voice is exquisite, simply perfect so far as it goes, but it is not a strong voice. You've worked it like a cart-horse! Ah! you may well be ashamed. Who is your doctor? Monsieur Didier? Tch! I have no opinion of him! There is but one man in all Paris whom I would trust in so vital a matter. He charges exorbitantly, it is true; but he is a friend of mine, I could possibly arrange matters. Where are your prescriptions? I hope I know something of throats. Let me at least see what is being done."

Anne laughed, but less artificially than usual. There is but one kind of sympathy that can be received by a nature like hers. To be sorry for a person is often offensive; to be sorry *with* does not hurt at all! Monsieur Colomb had sometimes been obviously sorry for Anne's loneliness, and she had disliked his expressions of kindly pity, even while quite prepared to make use of him. Now he was distressed with her, and distressed to the verge of anger, and albeit not a very grateful person, his scolding roused in her a momentary warmth of gratitude.

Scold her he certainly did! He sat twitching his shaggy brows over prescriptions of tar-water and tannin, and he offered her more advice than love. Had he been the most tactful of men, he could have found no better way of furthering his suit, and he left her accepted suitor.

"It is my best move now," Anne said to herself, when the door had closed on him, "and it is not so unfair! I shall really make him an excellent wife."

Old Monsieur Colomb was thinking about her voice. He went straight to his friend the doctor, who he hoped would reduce his fees on the score of their long acquaintance. Monsieur Colomb was very stingy over trifles, and never above knocking off a few francs wherever feasible. He was prepared to spend pounds in taking Anne abroad, but he would certainly

haggle over each item in the bill. He was generous in big matters and miserly in small ones.

The doctor, not unnaturally, was irritated. He saw no reason why friendship should mulct him of his just dues!

"He is too mean! If he is so interested in the Du Clos, let him pay for her!" he said.

Old Colomb, discomfited, but not at all abashed, hirpled oft down the boulevard and turned in at the open door of his favourite church.

He had a chronically stiff knee and he was tired, but would not for the world treat himself to a cab. He crossed himself, and knelt in the side chapel. All the lines of peevish irritation and fatigue seemed to soften while he knelt; his good brown eyes were full of prayer. And he prayed as simply as a child: that Anne might get her beautiful voice back, and (rather as an afterthought) that he might make her a very good husband. He had no doubt that she would make him a very good wife. She had promised to do that, and had he not observed her for nearly a year?

No saint stooped from her niche to whisper to her devotee that Mademoiselle du Clos was not quite so good as he thought her. But, after all, perhaps that would not have been at all a saintly action!

They know better, those holy ones! They at least have learnt that he who gives, if it is but one heartfelt prayer, adds oil to the light of his lamp; but it takes more than a saint to know whose flame is burning brightest, or which among the last may yet stand first.

Mademoiselle du Clos and Monsieur Félix Colomb were married three months later, and went to Italy for their honeymoon and for the sake of her voice.

Monsieur Colomb's relatives did not greatly approve the marriage, but did not care to offend him by openly grumbling at it. Mademoiselle du Clos had absolutely no ties! Her mother had died in childbirth, her father had been killed by a Prussian bullet. The distant cousin who had grudgingly paid the expenses of an education had made it very clear that she should support herself at the earliest possible moment.

Mademoiselle du Clos had reimbursed the money that had been expended on her with interest; there had been no debt of affection to repay.

"It is so fortunate my cousin did not in the least care for me! Family ties are apt to be tiresome," she remarked, but old Félix Colomb shook his head.

"If you had not been of a naturally good disposition, Anne, such a loveless upbringing might have made you bad," he said.

CHAPTER VI

MR. KNIGHT came into possession of the Yellow House in the late autumn. He did not expect the county magnates to call on him, he was quite free from any vulgar social ambitions. He had city friends of his own whom he perhaps meant to invite later on, but for the present he wished to give his whole mind to the enjoyment of his love.

Mr. Knight was a person of simple habits so far as personal comfort was concerned; he cared very little what he ate or on what he slept, but he felt it only due to so dignified a place that he should keep a retinue of servants to look after it, and he had plenty to think about and to arrange.

He enjoyed his first solitary dinner in the raftered dining-room, though he thought very kindly of the ex-master who had been his host. The walls were still hung with portraits of De Grouchys in ruffles and wigs. They nearly all had grey eyes that were set rather far apart under level jet-black eyebrows, and they all had that curiously "fated" look that one sometimes sees in old and unlucky families. The present Mr. de Grouchy had not sold his ancestors with the ancestral halls, but he had been sadly puzzled as to what to do with them, and had gladly accepted Mr. Knight's offer to give them house room till he should have made up his mind where to put them. So there they were, staring down at the interloper with melancholy aloofness, while he, for his part, sipped his wine and stared back. He appreciated the portraits, just as he had appreciated the old house. They touched the vein of romance in him, which he had never before had time to cultivate, and of which he was half ashamed.

It seemed to Thomas Knight that if those gallant gentlemen could step out of their frames they would perhaps join him in a glass of port, and that, like the present De Grouchy, they would be far too well-bred to be anything but polite to the stranger under their roof. He fancied that he could make them understand that he was quite aware that a bought place could never be his, in the same sense that it was always theirs, even though they might have sold every rood of the ground. As for the women, he had less respect for them. They looked grand, with their erect mien and grave stateliness, but he fancied that one woman was very like another underneath the surface, and that madam in her satin gown and Sally in her print frock both probably liked dainty fare and fine clothes and pretty speeches better than anything else. He was not shy of women, and he believed that he understood them.

Years before the time when this story opens, when he had been richer in youth and poorer in money, Thomas Knight had fallen more or less in love with a girl whose birth and fortune were above his own, but who condescended to flirt with him. He had been furiously indignant when she refused his offer of marriage. His heart was probably less hurt than his pride and his respect for women, but in bruising that last-named quality the girl had done him a wrong that it is difficult to overestimate.

Mr. Knight, being of a cheerful and healthy mind, got over his bitterness after a short time, and he smiled now if he happened to remember his boyish infatuation. He by no means eschewed the society of women; indeed he was uniformly kind to them; but he never again, to use his own expression, "expected too much of them." He never expected them to be as strictly honourable as an honourable man, or to be free from small jealousies, or to stick to the truth if it was to their disadvantage so to do, or to hold their tongues about their friends' defects, or to be above petty scheming in order to attain private ends. If they were charming and pretty and ready to please, that, he maintained, was as much as one should demand.

"The fact that he is not quite a gentleman comes out in

his views about us," a woman once said of Thomas Knight. And I fear that she added, "It is the shopkeeper in his blood."

She was wrong, however; it was not the shopkeeper's fault that an inch was wanting to his son's moral stature.

Mr. Knight sat some time over his wine chewing the cud of his reflections. His mother had been a Devonshire woman, and perhaps that was why he had never become fatally infected by the town malaria of restlessness. Then he opened the long window and stepped out on to the terrace. The air was full of the smell of falling leaves, and was crisp with the premonition of the coming winter. Old Mrs. Knight, had she been by, would have certainly warned him that the place was damp "in the dimpsies." It was curious that the loss of her had set free in him tastes that had never before fully expanded. His warmest affections had been centred in the old woman, whom he had petted and teased to her heart's great and abiding content, but he could never have made this purchase had she been alive, for she would have felt the grandeur of bygone days gloomy and unbearable. There was no one now whose wishes need be considered in any of the private concerns of his life. The reflection was not a cheerful one, for though youth craves to stretch its limbs freely, by the time we get to middle age we are most of us thankful for the bonds that love and custom have forged. Mr. Knight sighed and shrugged his shoulders. He believed that he should not again possess a home in the dearest sense of the word, for that presupposes a person for whom one has an especial affection, but he would make the best of his æsthetic delight in a house.

From the extreme end of the terrace he could just see the windows of the west wing, and he was amused to observe that some effect of light gave them the appearance of being lit up. It was certainly eminently appropriate that the blue drawing-room should be illumined on this first night of his instalment, the illusion tallied so charmingly with the legend! He smiled because his fancy was tickled, but he was far too sane and healthy minded to be more than pleasantly amused.

He presently finished smoking his pipe, and going round to the left wing, entered it by the side door.

This older part of the house had been little used for years. He sent for a candle, and mounted the broad, shallow oak stairs with an almost boyish pleasure.

An imaginative person might see ghosts here at every turn, he thought. Indeed, the place was full of the spirit of the past, and the alert figure with the candle had a quite typical effect, for Mr. Knight was really bent on carrying cleanliness and light into dark corners, and on judiciously and tenderly restoring the more dilapidated parts of his purchase.

He paused with his hand on the handle of the blue room, because he heard the sound of music, and was momentarily puzzled and perhaps more impressed than he knew. Then he opened the door and staggered backwards, letting the candle fall from his hand. For one second it certainly appeared to him that he saw (as distinctly as he had ever seen anything in his life) a brightly lit room, and a woman lying on her back on the sofa, and that the blood was trickling from a wound below her left breast. It seemed to him also that he smelt roses.

When he staggered back the door slammed in his face, and he leaned gasping against the opposite wall. Then he pulled himself together, felt in his pocket for his matches, and picked up his candle and relit it. He was no coward; he was not going to disgrace himself in his own eyes by rushing downstairs in a panic like the first unlucky buyer of this unlucky house. He controlled his startled nerves as a fine rider will control a nervous horse. He had held all his emotions in hand all his life, and they answered to his command in an emergency.

He opened the door of the haunted room again, and walked up to the sofa. No one lay there, and the candles on the mantelpiece were not aflame, but the room was not dark, for the light streamed aslant, in a long purple and red and yellow ray, through the stained window of the chapel in the courtyard, and right across the sofa and the polished satinwood floor of the blue drawing-room.

Mr. Knight walked through the beam of light, and flung

open the window. He could hear the sound of the organ, and he almost fancied that he could smell incense. A late autumn rose climbed against the wall ; he could reach it with his hand, and the air was sweet with its fragrance. His face looked a trifle white in the rather eerie light, but he would hardly allow even to himself that he had had a scare. Already he was telling himself that he could not have seen a ghost, because ghosts only exist in the imagination of hysterical people. He resolutely seated himself on the sofa with a rather set smile on his lips. The red and purple gleams touched his shoulder and hands with half-comic effect, and he sat bolt upright, determined to prove that he was not in the least alarmed. Mr. Knight had a good deal of sturdy self-respect, which was of trustworthy and excellent quality. He did not care too much what his fellow-men thought of him, but he would not acquit himself unmanfully before the secret judge who dwells in the court of our souls. Then he walked deliberately out of the haunted room and slowly down the stairs. Nothing would have induced him to hurry.

He met his housekeeper as he stepped into the courtyard, and she looked oddly at him. She had been born and bred in the village, and she knew all about the De Grouchy ghost.

"I have just been into the blue drawing-room, Mrs. Lovesaye," said he jauntily. "You have a fine old-fashioned superstition about it, haven't you?"

"Oh, Lor', sir!" said she.

"No doubt you would have been ready to tell me that I should not come out of it alive, eh?"

"Oh no, sir!—that ain't it at all."

"But you need not be nervous about such fancies," he went on, with that slight touch of patronage in his tone that was unwittingly offensive to some women. "So long as a man does not believe in spectres they can't touch him, you know, and I—but what is the matter? My good woman, you seem scared to death."

"Oh, sir, it was nothing; it was only just I got a turn seeing you coming across the courtyard holding your hand up as if you was shading the candle, and it out all the time!" said she,

"Oh, pshaw! Here, take it, please," said Mr. Knight.

He handed the candle to her rather abruptly; he was a little more annoyed than the occasion warranted; then, turning his back on her, he went into the chapel, and sat down on a seat by the door. Many of the tenants on the estate were Roman Catholics, and for many generations mass had been held in this proprietary chapel. The present owner could have closed it had he so chosen, but he was by no means minded to start on his new *rôle* of landlord hampered with a feud with his poorer neighbours. It was accordingly to be used as heretofore, and at the present moment one of the pupils at the Catholic training college was playing on the organ.

Mr. Knight was not musical enough to know whether the performer played well or ill, but he listened with pleased interest. It was years since he had last been in a Roman Catholic church, and the sound of the mass music, as well as the faint smell of incense, brought back the recollection of his youth with extraordinary vividness. He had been sent to Paris on a matter of business when his father was alive, and when he was quite a young man. He had enjoyed himself with the intensity of an unspoiled youth. The Colombs (who were rich French merchants) had given him hospitality. He had struck up a lasting friendship with Monsieur Colomb (*fils*). He and Monsieur Colomb still wrote to each other once a year at the New Year. Little stiff, old-fashioned letters that told nothing, but that yet both men would have missed had they ceased. Monsieur Colomb was a good deal his senior; he must actually be grey-haired now! It was in Paris that Mr. Knight had met the young lady who had flirted with him; he had frequently followed her into a church in order that he might sit behind her, and feast his eyes on her graceful kneeling figure. He had idealised her a good deal, but after that Paris experience he had thrown himself with all his energy into business, and had no more time for nonsense. The music made him a little sad now, because music touches the emotional side of us, and really, after a certain age, one does not care to have one's emotions disinterred and dragged up to the surface. Mr. Knight did

not, as a rule, waste any futile regrets over his youth. He had not had a bad time of it, as times go, but possibly he had missed something that belongs to very good and to very miserable experiences, and which the people who have had neither miss. The sense of having missed something came over him as he listened. The pleasure died out of his face (it was still a handsome face, and the kind of face that women and children trust), and he frowned impatiently and was glad when it ceased.

The pupil from the training college blew out the candles, and left the chapel by a side door. The side door banged sharply, and, one sound awakening another, a child's cry immediately resounded through the place.

Mr. Knight jumped to his feet in amazement. This really was astonishing. What on earth could a child be doing in the private chapel at this time in the evening? For the second time that day a feeling of eeriness came over him. He could see nothing, and it was now dark.

"Who is there?" he called out in a clear tone.

His voice echoed, and sounded very loud and commanding in the empty place. He repeated the question, and then a small voice replied, "Jeronime." The altar-cloth shook as if a little private earthquake were taking place under it, and the top of a round fluffy head peeped out for a second. Mr. Knight was fond of children, but he was annoyed at having been startled.

"You are a very naughty child, whoever you are," said he. "And it is lucky for you that your priest did not catch you hiding under there."

He walked up the aisle, and the child dived back into her hiding-place. For the second time that evening he struck a match in order to investigate a mystery.

"Come along! I shan't hurt you, though I daresay you deserve a birch rod," he said. "Come along, my lad; your mammy is probably looking for you high and low."

He lit one of the tall wax tapers, and stooping held it close to the ground, and lifted up the stiff, embroidered altar-cloth. He was considerably taken aback by what he saw. He had

expected to find a village urchin, probably a truant from the monastery school, with bilberry-stained lips and ragged coat. Instead he discovered a little lady in an embroidered white frock, whose great violet eyes stared back at him reproachfully.

"Maman looks not for Jeronime. Jeronime looks for Mère Marthe and the sea," said the child, and she gulped down a big sob.

Mr. Knight was kind-hearted, and he was sorry he had mentioned birch rods. He sat down on the altar steps, and with infinite patience coaxed the little girl out of her shelter. She crawled out on her hands and knees at last, and then he took her on his knee and rubbed her cold little fingers between his own.

His wonder grew as he did so. A miracle could hardly have surprised him more than did the apparition of this small and daintily dressed maiden. The Mother and Child in their niche above looked down benignly, but offered no solution of the riddle.

"What did you tell me is your name? Jeremiah, eh? but Jeremiah is an odd name for a girl."

She eyed him solemnly for a minute, and then breathed softly, giving equal value to each syllable, "Nanon Jeronime."

"And where do you come from, Nanon Jeronime?"

"I losted me," said she, and shook her head dolefully. Then apparently she tired of the effort to talk English, and suddenly volunteered a long statement in somewhat bad French.

Maman had gone away in a big ship a long, long time ago, she said, and had left Jeronime behind all by herself. Jeronime was very unhappy; she did not like England, and she wanted Mère Marthe. She started to look for Mère Marthe, and she ran and ran till her legs hurt her dreadfully, and would not go on. At this point she paused, pulled up her frock, and rubbed her fat knees expressively. Then she met a sheep with curly horns, and he was so like her own *chère* Pierre at home, that she thought perhaps it was really

Pierre, and that he would show her the way. So she followed him, and he went in at a big gate. Then she lost him, but she found a house and a church, and the door was open, and she smelt something that smelt like Sunday at home. So she went in and sat on a chair, but she ached so, and she was so tired that she rolled off, and Mère Marthe said that it was wicked to sleep on one's chair, so she crept under the altar, where no one could see her, and then she thought that she was in a field playing with Pierre, but he would butt at her knees and hurt her, and then he bumped against her so hard that he made quite a loud noise, and she cried out, and some one said, "Who is there?"

Mr. Knight could not follow the whole of this somewhat rambling story, but when Jeronime broke into French a sudden inspiration had come to him. He remembered that the girl of whom De Grouchy had spoken was a French woman. Could this be the child who had been adopted by "the pernicious old fool"?

"Do you live with Miss Merridan?" he asked. But having finished telling her story, Jeronime had exhausted herself. She swallowed hard to keep back tears. "Poor Jeronime is so hungry," she said wistfully, and Mr. Knight, thus reminded of his duties as a host, took her up in his arms and carried her into the house to his housekeeper.

Mrs. Lovesaye, on seeing her new master walk into the house with a child in his arms, was almost as much "put about" as she had been by the extinguished candle. She knew strange things would happen from the moment he went into that room, she afterwards remarked, but at the moment she forgot about ghosts in a womanly interest in this little cold and sleepy body.

Nanon Jeronime was coaxed and cuddled, and presently made quite happy over a bowl of bread and milk, but she clung fast to Mr. Knight, to his secret gratification and pride, and finally went comfortably to sleep on his knee, with her head resting on his arm. She had never taken to Miss Merridan in like manner, and never would.

Mr. Knight reluctantly left her with Mrs. Lovesaye, and

set off to walk to the Grange. Events were happening oddly! It amused him to reflect that he and Miss Merridan (whom he pictured as a fussy old lady with spectacles and white hair) were in possession of a mutual secret, though of course he should never let it transpire that he knew whose child Jeronime was.

It was nine o'clock when he turned in at his neighbour's gate. Miss Merridan caught the sound of a footstep on the gravel, and bid the footman open the door. She was standing in the hall, flushed and excited, and when Mr. Knight walked in she hurried to meet him with outstretched hands.

"Oh, do you bring me news of my little lost girl? but yes, I see you do," she cried.

Lucilla Merridan was tall and graceful, and she had one charm which is rare in English women—she walked well. She looked her very best in her clinging satin tea-gown, and a scene suited her. "An uncommonly handsome woman, after all," thought Mr. Knight, and a twinkle of amusement shone in his grey eyes as he compared her with his preconceived idea of her.

"Miss Nanon Jeronime is perfectly safe. She had a capital supper, and is now fast asleep in my housekeeper's room. It seemed a pity to bring her out again to-night so I thought I might venture to suggest that she should be left in Mrs. Lovesaye's charge till to-morrow," said he.

Miss Merridan took his hand with a pretty effusiveness.

"How can I thank you? I have suffered tortures of anxiety. But I must see the poor darling to-night. Will you not take me to her, now—at once?"

Again Mr. Knight felt momentarily amused. It struck him as rather comical that he should escort this handsome and very excitable lady across the park. But Miss Merridan was not accustomed to being denied. She sent for a cloak and hastily enveloped her head in a pink scarf, and they set out.

She walked very fast across the stately old park, for though she was delicate, her spirits always carried her through any

time of stress or excitement. Poor Lucilla! Perhaps if she had married the curate who had proposed to her when she was seventeen, and had had the large family that Providence so often vouchsafes to curate's wives, she would not now have been possessed by such a craving and often disappointed spirit. But it is only a "perhaps." She was really longing to see the child, and yet when she got to the Yellow House a dull feeling of disillusionment came over her. Mrs. Lovesaye was cross and surprised at the intrusion, and Jeronime was equally cross when the light woke her, and she turned over on her face with a grunt. The moment was not at all rich in sentiment.

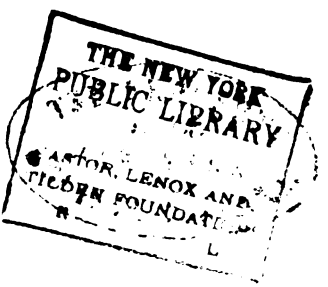
Poor Miss Merridan returned home feeling cold and tired and wretched.

"The child showed no pleasure at seeing me! It was really very naughty of her to run off like that," she said to the confidential maid, who was brushing her still beautiful hair.

"It was indeed," said the woman, who did not approve of Miss Jeronime's advent, but had not ventured to say so before. "But I must say, ma'am, that she isn't at all what you would call an affectionate child—and you so good to her, too!"

Miss Merridan sighed heavily. What was the use of adopting a daughter if the daughter gave no love in return?

But Jeronime gained a friend by her wilfulness (the moral is obviously bad), and Mr. Knight from that day became a pleasant factor in her life.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CHAPTER VII

IT is not my purpose to inflict on the reader a detailed account of all the systems of education that were intermittently brought into play on Jeronime's account. She duly caught the measles, mumps, and whooping-cough; she nearly died of a brand new cure for scarlet fever. She hated London, and rejoiced when the time came for returning to Hollowdene. She was occasionally of supreme importance; but, as the years went by, was oftener relegated to a back place. She outgrew the stage when it is possible to vent one's feelings in a loud, comfortable roar, and ceased at last to cry for Mère Marthe and Maman and the sea, but she did not cease to remember them, because she had an unusually retentive memory.

Rowland, Miss Merridan's own maid, disliked the child, and perhaps that fact accounted for a few of the difficulties that beset Jeronime's childhood.

Rowland was no villain, she never ill-treated the little girl; indeed, she made a point of keeping her tidy and "as much like a lady as might be," but she always looked upon Jeronime as an interloper, and she conscientiously presented childish delinquencies to her mistress in the very worst light.

When nursery days were over and her nurse departed, Jeronime would have had rather a bad time of it if it had not been for her dear Mr. Knight.

In a moment of expansive delight Miss Merridan had invented a surname for her *protégée*.

"I will give the dear child a happy name!" cried she. "From the hour that she comes to me she shall be called Joy."

Mr. Knight's sense of humour was tickled by the quaint alliteration of the two J's. He rhymed "Miss Jeronime Joy" with "She likes a new toy," and made the silly couplet the excuse for many a gift. There is no doubt that so far as he was concerned, the name was appropriate and the friendship salutary. If it had not been for Jeronime it is doubtful whether he would ever have gone beyond the confines of his own park. For, as the years went by, the habit of the recluse gained on Mr. Knight. He had more than a sufficiency of money, joined to an insufficiency of desires. He had easily (too easily) attained the possession of the one object he had heartily coveted. The Yellow House was his, but the fascination it had for him was without ulterior motive, and was no stepping-stone to ambition, social or otherwise.

When he first took the place he only spent the summer holiday in it, and spent the rest of the year at work in Norwich. But five years later he retired from business and lived from henceforth on his estate. The county would have opened its doors to him, but he never knocked at them. He was a good landlord, respected by his poorer neighbours. He sat on the bench as magistrate, and was suspected of heterodox and city-bred views on the subject of game-laws. Such views were, of course, condemned, but otherwise he showed no alarming tendencies, and was not so much unpopular as unknown.

His eccentricity, if eccentricity it was, was not marked enough to arouse curiosity. He did not pose as a hater of his fellows; on the contrary, he was kindly polite to any person (with the exception of a Durham tripper) whom he happened to come across. The odd thing was that he so seldom came across any one!

Week after week, month after month, year after year he lived alone in the Yellow House, and wandered alone (except when Jeronime was with him) in the park, and the charm the place had for him deepened.

He repaired it very lovingly and carefully, taking an infinity of pains that not a brick should be out of keeping, that no aggressive newness should insult the dignified age which he

revered. *He* allowed no char-a-bancs to invade his precincts! but, oddly enough, he grew to think of himself as the guardian rather than as the possessor of the Yellow House.

"It belongs to ghosts and to the past," he once said to Jeronime, "but I take great care of it for them. If it were not for me it might have been turned into a tea-garden or an hotel."

Jeronime was having tea with him on that occasion—an old-fashioned tea, spread on the heavy octagon table in the library—a tea to which it was quite worth while to draw up one's chair comfortably. She was nine years old then and he was fifty, but despite the disparity in age they had discovered some few dislikes and predilections in common.

They were both people of sensitive distastes! They could neither of them abide the smell of musk, nor the sight of a sandy cat, nor the flavour of boiled mutton. They both dearly liked a garden, flowers being of such delicate quality that they can show their graciousness without offence, even to the most fastidious. Mr. Knight's solitary life had increased the growth of fastidiousness that had been only pleasantly observable five years before, but which was slightly morbid now; as for Jeronime, she liked perilously few people.

Jeronime, planting her toes firmly on her stool, for the carved wooden chair she sat in had a high seat, lifted the solid silver tea-pot with both hands. Her round face wore the look of serious responsibility that always amused her host. She was a fine-looking child. Her forehead was very square and white, her nose short, and her mouth a trifle big, but finely modelled. She never unbent till both cups were safely filled, and the cream and sugar in without a spill, but when that was accomplished she smiled broadly and heaved a sigh of content.

"This is the place where I like best to be. I wish that it were always tea-time with you at the Yellow House," said she.

"Thank you, Miss Jerry," said Mr. Knight. "So you are fond of the Yellow House too, eh? You like it better than any other place, now that is just exactly what I should expect."

He pondered for a moment over her childish expression of pleasure. He never forgot the secret which had been confided to him by Jeronime's father. Possibly his small neighbour was the more attractive to him because he knew something about her which not all the world knew.

"Why, of course I do," said Jeronime, "because it *is* nicer than any other place. I don't see why you say it belongs to ghosts. It belongs to you and to me."

The amused expression of Mr. Knight's face quickened to a delighted interest.

"Ah—so you feel that? You feel that it belongs to you, that you have a share in it."

Jeronime smiled broadly again. She was not in the least shy with Mr. Knight. Their intercourse was founded on a rock-bed of confidence. When she did not understand him, she did not mind in the least, but though she was only nine years old she often understood him very well.

"I pretend it's mine too, you know! It makes it so interesting. You don't mind, do you, Mr. Knight? You are looking rather grave."

"No, no, I don't mind," said he; "I am only a squatter here, Jerry! I've no birthright to it. I know my place."

He glanced from Jeronime to the portrait over her head and back again. The portrait represented a Mistress Margaret de Grouchy, whose bones had been laid in the chapel vault some centuries ago, but whose eyes were the eyes of the child who sat opposite to him. Mistress Margaret had been learned in the use of herbs and simples, and versed in the arts of astrology and divination.

"That's the lady that is like me!" said Jeronime, following Mr. Knight's glance. "Mrs. Lovesaye say she is 'xactly like me except that she kept her hands gloved, and mine are like a ploughboy's. There's another greater difference, though. She had a tame hawk. I wish I might have a tame hawk."

"It would be more becoming in you to put it t'other way round. She is your elder by some few hundred years, my little lady," said he, smiling across the tea-table at her. "You

should rather say, that is the lady whom I resemble. She came first, you know."

"I could train my hawk to hunt rats," Jeronime went on, following her own train of ideas; "I couldn't let her eat fluffy chickens, or young rabbits, because they are such darlings, but I don't think rats are so very nice, do you? Joseph Adams says that the rats in the big barn eat us out of house and home. My hawk would be very useful, and she would teach me to be more of a lady. That would please godmother."

"How would she manage that?" said Mr. Knight, doubtfully.

"Because her claws would run into me if I did not wear gloves!" said Jeronime triumphantly.

"Yes, yes to be sure. So you feel the house belongs to you?" said Mr. Knight.

Perhaps the sayings and doings of a quaint child appeared to this bachelor unusually remarkable, because he had never before had to do with children. He certainly accentuated Jeronime's childish assumption of possession by playing up to it, with a gravity that was at first half-assumed, but later on more than three-quarters earnest. He talked to her of "your boudoir," "your rose-garden," "your drawing-room." Little Miss queened it very happily at the Yellow House, and ran there as often as ever she could, which was not as often as she wished, for Miss Merridan sometimes remembered to be jealous of Mr. Knight, and on such occasions would forbid the child to "take so much advantage" of their kind neighbour's good nature.

"But I know Mr. Knight likes to have me, because he is my greatest friend and I am his greatest friend, though he has some old gentlemen friends he has known longer," Jeronime would say, and never understood why godmother would look tragically at her and murmur, "But one must not expect gratitude."

As a matter of fact Miss Merridan expected a good deal! Jeronime was not given to easy expressions of feeling, and herein lay one reason of the poor lady's bitter disappointment,

for that she *was* disappointed was beyond doubt, seeing that she, at least, seldom lacked words in which to clothe her sensations.

Lucilla did not understand children, though she understood many theories about them. Mrs. Lovesaye, who had no theories at all, save a few old-fashioned ones, had a better way with them. Hannah Lovesaye was a fair-complexioned woman of fifty, with steady, kindly eyes, out of which looked a motherly soul. She "mothered" her master, though he didn't find it out, and as for little Miss Jeronime, she was as much at home in the housekeeper's room at the Yellow House as she was in the library.

Jeronime learnt from Mrs. Lovesaye that little girls mustn't be greedy or rude, that it is naughty to grumble over the dispensations of Providence—over a rainy day, for example—for "God sends the weather"; that one should say grace at meals, and thank God at one's evening prayers for "all His benefits," and that one must never forget to feed the birds in the winter, because He cares for the sparrows. Mrs. Lovesaye made golden brown cakes, stamped with a crown, and told her stories of "the little people." It was no wonder the child loved going to the Yellow House!

Perhaps it was no great wonder that Miss Merridan felt sore. There is no doubt that she was an exacting and self-tormenting woman, but it must be remembered that she had been heavily handicapped. Money oils so many hinges that it comes doubly hard to the rich person to find such difficulty in unlocking the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven within. Then the years between thirty and forty are difficult years to many women. Every one knows that youth suffers from moral and mental as well as physical growing-pains, and every one who has sense or tenderness makes allowance for its aberrations. But poor Lucilla had been worshipped rather than "allowed" for; she had been so petted and shielded that the difficulties, inherent in becoming middle-aged, weighed most heavily on her.

She did not in the least desire to appear young, but yet she missed the warm natural admiration that youth evokes. She

was clever enough to know the difference between the real and spurious article! When she was in a good temper she sometimes said that she had learned to find her own joy in ministering to the lives of others, and it was true that she was hospitable to many sorts and conditions of men, especially to riders of hobbies, social and philanthropic; but as to happiness!—why, at heart she knew she had not caught it, and she was constantly being deceived by the objects of her benevolence.

Jeronime distrusted most hobby-riders, she also distrusted long-haired men, and all women who spoke on platforms. She despised musicians (though she was fond of music), and she looked askance at poets (though at times she was as dreamy as the maddest of them). She shrank from effusiveness, and never shared her patroness's enthusiasms. She was (naturally) not popular, but remained aloof, a grave, sturdy child in a corner, who took no part in the game, till it at last happened that an active dislike coloured her sentiments towards one of her godmother's guests.

But when this occurred Jeronime was nearly seventeen, though she scarcely looked it. Close on thirteen years had passed since the time when Dr. Wallace MacIlvert had first interfered with her destiny, and since she became the chief ingredient in one of his most successful prescriptions. Successful, that is, from his point of view; for though Jeronime had not fulfilled all Miss Merridan's expectations, she had prevented that lady from lapsing into hypochondria.

Miss Merridan had had a succession of teachers of varying views and kinds for her adopted child, but had lately grown rather sick of them all.

"It is surely time I reaped some reward for all the pains I have bestowed," she declared; but alas! she did not find Jeronime repaying.

She was suffering from a profound sense of discouragement and a temporary lack of an object of enthusiasm when she was startled by the sight of a once familiar handwriting. She blushed (in spite of her forty-three years), and had nearly put the letter in the fire unopened, when something—was it her

good or her bad angel?—stayed her hand. She read, half unwillingly—

"DEAR MADAM,—On finding myself once more in England my mind naturally turns to her who (among many acquaintances) I counted as my one friend.

"I have never ceased to regret that you refused to see me before I quitted this country, thirteen years ago. I regret it not only for my own sake, but also for yours. I had intended to make clear to you many facts that I could never throw to the public, that I could disclose to no other living soul. It was in order that I might do this that I called to see you on the 4th of July in 1884. I wrongly believed that you would have the courage to rise above conventional considerations, and would refuse to listen to anything against me till you had heard my story from my own lips. Though I was evidently at fault in so believing, I am yet convinced that my estimate of your friendship was so far correct that to imagine me guilty of anything dishonourable was no small pain to you; and I further believe that to know your former confidence was not misplaced would afford you a satisfaction that would far outweigh any inconvenience you might suffer from holding an opinion adverse to that of our little world.

"If I am again wrong in my supposition, if I have overestimated your sincerity, and the courage of your nature, I can only apologise for having troubled you in the matter.

"In that case you will, of course, leave this letter unanswered; but if I am making no mistake in trusting to the reality of your friendship, you will, equally of course, give me the opportunity which you once refused.

"I am,

"Yours—as you will,

"WALLACE MACILVERT."

The letter haunted Lucilla Merridan. She read it in the first instance with indignation, but yet it haunted her!

"The reality of your friendship. The courage of your nature." Had she indeed been disloyal to these great quali-

ties? What if it were possible, after all, that the man was no scoundrel? was as good—nay, even better than she had thought him? His words implied much. They gave subject for meditation. If they meant anything they surely meant that he could have cleared his character had he chosen so to do; but some honourable scruple, or perhaps sheer angry contempt for the opinion of the crowd, had tied his tongue.

"The adverse opinion of your little world!" Ah, how often she had declared to him that to her the world's opinion was of no moment!

"But it weighs with you more than you guess," he had once said. He would have told *her* the truth, because he counted her his friend.

Miss Merridan paced up and down her room half one wakeful night, with the doctor's plausible letter in her hand. It was perilously and entrancingly exciting to her to believe that she could be the only confidante of such a man. Yet though she certainly lacked common sense, her instinct told her that that sentence about his many acquaintances and his one friend rang false. He had been exceedingly popular, he had had any number of friends in the old days, before they all fell away from him. How mean the world was! He had always had a poor opinion of it! She remembered that he had told her that one of the most fundamental instincts of mankind leads them to trample on anything that falls out of the ranks, and she had answered hotly that every one was not made on that pattern, and *she* at least was attracted rather than repelled by misfortune, and that had she lived in the days of the pillory she would have stood between the victim and the stones. She could hear again his bass laugh, and that coarse, plain speaking that had always half-displeased and half-dominated her.

"Yes, yes; you wouldn't mind stones—perhaps! Martyrdom has its attractions for women. But when it came to the smell of rotten cabbages and the squish-squash of a rotten egg or two on your cheek, I am not quite so sure that you would not back a step or two."

How indignant she had been! She had enjoyed the

fillip of an occasional quarrel with him, but now the recollection of her own words stung her, and made her burn with a most uncomfortable sensation of shame. He had stood in the pillory (metaphorically), and where had she been? Not certainly "between the victim and the stones!"

The generous as well as the vain and foolish qualities of Lucilla Merridan ranged themselves on the doctor's side; he had very shrewdly called to them. Fainter and fainter grew the voice of common sense, which murmured now and then that not an honourable doctor in London would meet Wallace MacIlvert; that every shred of reputation had been left behind him, torn to shreds in that witness-box.

When morning broke Lucilla sat down to her writing-desk and dashed off a hasty, impulsive answer to that carefully composed letter.

"*If* I did wrong—and I pray that I may have been wrong—come and prove my mistake to me. I neither believe nor disbelieve. I wait.

"LUCILLA MERRIDAN."

One can fancy that the recipient was pleased enough at the way the fish had risen.

Lucilla sealed and addressed her note with feverish haste. Flinging wide her window she leant out, that the wholesome morning air might cool her flushed cheeks. Presently she saw Jeronime go into the garden. She was always out before any one else in the house was astir. She had her own ways, and was very independent. Miss Merridan's heart softened to Jeronime this morning, for the sight of the doctor's handwriting recalled to her mind all the warm hopes that had been born with the child's advent.

"Will you take a letter to the post for me, dear one? I want it to go at once. I will drop it down to you," cried Miss Merridan.

Jeronime, in a broad hat and a holland pinafore with capacious pockets, stood in the dewy garden and raised her face, as fresh as a flower. Stupid she might be, slow and

unresponsive she was, but in the matter of looks she had fulfilled her guardian's hopes. The charm of the violet-tinged eyes and roundly modelled chin and cheek struck Lucilla anew.

"You wake with the birds, Joy! You love your flowers, don't you? Are you going to water them before it gets hot?"

Jeronime picked up the letter that came fluttering to her feet.

"No, I am going to salt snails," she said, "I've got the salt in my pinafore pockets. It dries them up, you know. Your letter won't go a minute earlier if I go to the village with it now, so I'll put it into the bag to wait for the postman in the hall as usual. You have forgotten to stamp it, godmother."

Her wakeful night had set Miss Merridan's nerves on edge, and made her irritable.

"You are never eager to do anything for me!" she cried, and shutting the window, flung herself on her unslept-on bed.

"Those who serve me, serve me only from self-interest! No one—no, not even the child I have done everything for—serves me for love," she thought bitterly.

Then she re-read Dr. MacIlvert's letter.

"I regret not only for my own sake, but also for yours." That sentence had seemed odd, almost (considering his blemished character) cool, when she first considered it. Now she cried, "But it is true! I was not so rich that I could afford to fling away friendship! He knows that well enough. He understood—he always understood me."

CHAPTER VIII

SO it happened that Dr. Wallace MacIlvert came back into Miss Merridan's life, but he came back changed and with a purpose.

Thirteen years ago Lucilla Merridan had been but one of many rich and more or less admiring ladies, and if the idea of paying serious court to her had ever entered his head he had put it aside, being by no means anxious to marry. Now she represented a last chance, the value of which could scarcely be overestimated.

He had made a bad slip, and a bad slip at forty is apt to be irretrievable, especially if the stumbler has climbed to rather a high point, and has made a good many enemies during the necessary scramble! The doctor was fifty-three now, and Lucilla Merridan was about ten years younger. He remembered her age; he never forgot details. He thought about it while he walked through the plantations to Hollowdene, but then he thought about her note and smiled.

"She was always a bit of a fool," he said to himself hopefully, "and that kind of a fool seldom learns!"

Yet though he tried to take a cheerful view of his prospects, his cheerfulness was somewhat forced. Miss Merridan had been afraid of fortune-hunters, and he would be obliged to walk warily. He industriously turned over in his mind everything that he could recollect about her. She was accomplished, a fine linguist, and a tolerably good musician, and she had been decidedly handsome once. "But she won't have any looks left now," he reflected; "they will be worn away by nerves and tantrums."

He had made an effort to brush himself up and to pull himself together. He knew better than to approach such a woman in the guise of a suppliant. Lucilla Merridan had always been fascinated by strength; whatever appeal he made to her must be made boldly. But at the bottom of his heart lurked an anxiety that might be paralysing if he did not keep it well in check. He had fallen on such exceedingly bad times since he had left England. Over and over again had that miserable scandal raised its head and hissed and stung him just when he was beginning to remount the ladder. Perhaps, had he been the sort of person who is content with a mediocre success, he might have escaped some painful falls, but wherever he was he inevitably took a prominent place. He couldn't be modest! He really disliked the shade, even though some of his past deeds did not stand the light.

The summer sunshine was rather merciless. It showed how his hair had turned quite grey on his temples, and that there were crowsfeet at the corners of his still bright blue eyes. He had been most desirous of presenting a good appearance at Hollowdene, but his best endeavours could not conceal the fact that his coat was of a curiously greenish hue, and that it was wearing threadbare at the seams. He had gone hungry in order that he might purchase a decent portmanteau and a suit of dress clothes. He was doubtful now about the wisdom of his abstinence. It had seemed absolutely necessary, but the inner man is of more importance than the outer, and it is so very hard to play one's best on an empty stomach. He rehearsed the story he had to tell, and it struck him as lame. No man would find it quite convincing, but then he hoped that Miss Merridan had no man at her side.

While he was reflecting on these things the lady on whom his aspirations centred came in sight, walking slowly along the woodland path.

He recognised at once that she had altered less than he had, and that she wore her forty-three years well. "Tantrums and nerves" don't tell so much as downright hardship, and she had never encountered anything hard! She looked the dignified mistress of a well-to-do place.

The doctor stood still and bared his head; the slight emotion that he evinced on seeing Miss Merridan was quite genuine.

"Well? I've taken you at your word and come," said he. "Was I right, I wonder?"

Miss Merridan hesitated for a second. The unconventional greeting startled her, but she liked to be startled. The man's mellow voice, with the slight Scotch accent, thrilled her, the change in him touched her. His broad shoulders were a little bowed, and how much older he had become! How he must have suffered! He did not offer her his hand. That was why she held out both hers with a sudden impulse.

"Of course you were right to come! I ought to have heard what you had to say years ago, but——"

"No," said the doctor. "We won't shake hands just yet, my dear lady. I expect no implicit faith. I have learnt my lesson. I know now that even one's best friend, the person one trusts most, never believes in one without a full explanation, and I do *not* know that you are any longer my friend."

He took a high tone—this man whom no one cared to meet. He put his hostess entirely in the wrong, which gave her an unusual sensation.

"Let me hear the explanation now, *now*, while we are alone under God's sky," she cried eagerly; "I want to be able to believe in you again. I shall be thankful if you can make me see that I misjudged you."

He would have been thankful to have had a cup of tea and some slices of bread-and-butter, at least, before he plunged into the story. He swore to himself at her impatience. She would be a tiresome woman to live with! She put her own emotions before anything in heaven or earth; but then of course she could have no idea that he was so hungry.

"You are right," he said, with some dignity. "You shall hear all that there is to tell you before you so much as bid me break bread under your roof."

And at that Lucilla felt much ashamed, though she had no need to be.

They sat together on a log of wood, and Dr. MacIlvert told

the story which he had carefully thought out. It was an expurgated edition of what had happened, and in some respects it was quite true.

He described his disgust and horror when he first suspected foul play, and he *had* been horrified and disgusted. Lady Alice Lennox had killed her elderly husband by a singularly clever and cold-blooded system of slow poisoning, and Dr. MacIlvert would no more have aided and abetted that mad crime than he would have put his neck into the hangman's noose.

His evidence went dead against Lady Alice, but public opinion went dead against him. Lady Alice was young and pretty, and her husband had brutally ill-treated her. Dr. Wallace MacIlvert had been deep in the lady's confidence. He had certainly abused his position in the house. It came out during the trial that there had been passages between them that would have justified Mr. Lennox in getting a divorce.

Lady Alice's counsel had done his best to shift the crime on to the broader shoulders of the doctor, who stood in the witness-box. It had been a futile endeavour; there had been no tittle of evidence against him; but at the last moment, and after she had been found guilty, Lady Alice had slowly raised her hand and pointed at Wallace MacIlvert, after a fashion that had practically ruined the best years of his life.

"What I did, I did for him!" she had said, in the clear, vibrating voice that carried through the Court. "*He* made me do it! That man should be standing where I stand now!"

Those words had been repeated in every newspaper big and small. They had aroused an immense deal of popular feeling. The doctor had set his teeth, and determined to brave it out; but he couldn't; the mixture of falsehood and truth had been too strong for him. Lady Alice was found guilty (with a recommendation to mercy) and was sentenced to death. The sentence was remitted to penal servitude for life. The doctor left that witness-box sentenced too! He

knew that his reputation was damned, and that his enemies had their turn. He was furiously angry with Lady Alice, so angry that he had not one atom of pity for her fate. He still felt bitterly angry when he thought about her.

The populace believed that this doctor, who had always been something of an adventurer and looked coldly on by the profession, had first instigated a horrible crime and had then borne witness against his wretched tool. He had not done that; he had done evil enough, but not that. Yet how far his influence had drawn the wretched woman into strange and crooked paths only a juster Judge than any human one could know.

In telling his story to Lucilla Merridan he skimmed lightly over delicate ground. He dwelt on the malignity which had falsely accused him, and he gave her to understand that there had been at most an unwise flirtation with Lady Alice.

"Her liking turned to fear and hate when she found I meant to press the charge," he said. "I *had* to do what I did. The man was my patient, whatever else he was, and she killed him. I'd do it again under the circumstances, and I am glad she was convicted. She was a snake of a woman!—she was crushed, but she turned and bit me at the end of that ghastly trial, and the bite had venom in it!"

Miss Merridan shuddered.

"I don't wish to hear any more about that creature," she said. "You—you never really loved her, did you?"

It was an unjustifiable question, and she knew it; it was also a very unwise question, and *he* knew it.

"Never, my dearest lady!" he said; and there he spoke the truth, for whatever feeling he had for Lady Alice had certainly not been worth dignifying by the name of love.

He had taken pains to provide an explanation for many awkward things that had been said at that trial; he had been prepared with a defence, but after that foolish question he knew that he need not have taken so much trouble. Miss Merridan had no mind for details. It was easy to hoodwink her. A much less clever rogue than Dr. Wallace MacIlvert could have done it, had she happened to like him. Before an

hour had passed she declared herself "convinced," and he had resumed his old sway over her, and was listening in his turn to much that she had to tell him. He had always been a good listener; there had lain one reason of his extraordinary popularity.

They got up at last, and walked slowly towards the house. The estate was in the trimmest order, but the trees were still young. One would hardly name Hollowdene in the same breath with the Yellow House, but the doctor really admired it more than he admired any old place. Its apparent prosperity appealed strongly to him. It was early in June, and the garden blazed with colour. The crude yellow-red of the large comfortable house did not disturb him in the least, but his hostess apologised for it.

"I know it is frightful! Sometimes I feel as if I could hardly bear those aggressive new bricks any longer," said she, putting her hand before her eyes.

The doctor laughed aloud. He fancied that he could bear with that nice big house very well.

Jeronime was standing in the hall with her arms full of white lilies. She stared askance at the burly, shabby figure that followed Miss Merridan into the house.

"This is my adopted child. Would you have recognised her? Ah! she was a baby when you saw her last," said Miss Merridan.

Jeronime did not offer to shake hands. Her manners were decidedly bad at times, and she resented the interest with which the new-comer surveyed her.

"Yes, I should have recognised her. I am a good hand at recognising people," said Dr. MacIlvert.

"Why, when did you see me before?" asked Jeronime, bluntly.

"When you were between three and four years old," said the doctor.

Jeronime returned the compliment, and looked at him intently. Then a slow wave of colour spread over her face, and to the surprise of both her auditors she blurted out suddenly, "Do *vou* know where Mère Marthe is, and where Maman is?"

"I did not know that she remembered them," cried Miss Merridan. She was hurt afresh, and quite taken aback at this new proof of the child's reserve. "*I* have been your truest mother, Jeronime."

She stretched out her arms, but Jeronime, who hated anything approaching a scene, stooped to pick up some flowers that she had let fall and so evaded the embrace.

"I 'don't know why I thought he'd know. How silly of me!" she muttered. She brushed past them and ran upstairs, two steps at a time.

Miss Merridan's arms dropped. She sighed heavily.

"Joy is always so cold to me," she said.

"Dear lady, one must not expect too much from the young," said the doctor. "It is only when we are turning grey that we begin to realise the immense worth of true affection."

The remark sounded a trifle trite, but he was earnestly hoping that they might have something to eat before they had any more scenes, sentimental or otherwise.

"You are looking tired, you know. You've had a long walk. If you were still my patient I should prescribe a cup of tea and an armchair," he added, with a brisk change of tone, and with something of his old kindly, dictatorial manner.

"Why, tea is waiting for us among the roses on the lawn," said Miss Merridan. "Come, dear Doctor, we will forget that foolish child; we will forget all our troubles. You must 'break bread' with me again after all these years."

She led the way on to the lawn. The doctor sank into a delightful wicker chair. He was much more tired than she was; but then he knew when he was in clover, and she did not. He ate and drank heartily, and was refreshed. Miss Merridan called one of the gardeners and gave orders that her guest's luggage should be fetched from the station.

"I intended to put up at the inn," said he.

"Now that my old friend has come back I cannot let him go in a hurry," said Miss Merridan. She was naturally hospitable, and if she still had faint qualms of misgiving she suppressed them.

He leant back in his chair with a sensation of rest and comfort to which he had long been a stranger. He would have had great difficulty in paying his bill at an inn. He was tired of battling with difficulties; the effort becomes monotonous after a time.

"Well, well, if it pleases you to be so kind," he said, and knew that at last he had reached a quiet haven.

CHAPTER IX

JERONIME was young for her age in some respects, but any strong emotion has a ripening and forcing effect on immaturity. She disliked Dr. Wallace MacIlvert so heartily that she grew a little bit older in the process.

He was more antipathetic to her than the smell of musk or the taste of boiled mutton. But it was not only a personal distaste that possessed her; she also bore him a long grudge. Mère Marthe was but a dim memory now, Maman scarcely more than the recollection of a beautiful voice, with notes like the lower notes of a harp in it; but Jeronime still remembered, and would remember all her life, the sense of miserable desolation that had swept over her poor little soul when she had been left all alone in a strange, new place to strange, new people.

That misery had been somehow connected with Dr. MacIlvert. She was sure of that, in a childish, unreasonable way. Directly she saw him again she knew that he had been accessory to Maman's desertion. When she reached her bedroom she sat quite still for a long time, trying ineffectually to piece her memories together.

Jeronime sometimes had schoolroom tea, and sometimes dined with the grown-up people in the dining-room. She disliked the last arrangement, especially on fine summer evenings. An elaborate dinner seemed to her a terrible waste of time, and she resented having to change her dress. Miss Merridan came to the girl's room before dinner. She had been much moved by the afternoon's event; she was quivering with excitement, and longing to talk to some one, if only to a child, about all that had occurred.

"You must dine with us to-night, Joy," she said, "and put on your best frock, and see that there are roses on the dinner-table. We must give our old friend a pretty welcome, must we not?"

"Dr. MacIlvert isn't my friend. I don't like him, godmother," said Jeronime bluntly.

Good men and bad men are fashioned of the same ingredients, but in bad men the stuff seems badly mixed and the proportions all wrong! Dr. Wallace MacIlvert had the minutest grain of honour in him, and a good large share of audacity and self-love, consequently he was an unscrupulous person, but he was not a monster. He never wished to do any one harm for the mere sake of hurting, unless indeed they had deliberately gone out of their way to hurt *him*; in that case he had no hesitation about hitting back, openly, if he were in a position to hit openly, from behind a hedge if he wasn't. He was by nature rather overbearing, being physically and mentally of a tough and stalwart calibre, but he had had some hard lessons knocked into him; among others he had learnt not to be too ready to despise an enemy.

Thirteen years ago he would merely have been amused at a little girl's aversion to him, now he at first tried to overcome it. He was not sensitive to other people's opinion unless he believed that their ill-will could practically injure him, but experience had taught him that when a man is once down, and in the wrong place, all sorts of people may have power to prevent his righting himself. It would be safer and better to be on good terms, even with so insignificant a little person as Miss Jeronime Joy.

But Jeronime would not be on good terms; she would have nothing to say to him, and there is nothing more snubbing than the rebuff of a schoolgirl. Miss Merridan reproved her bad manners, and the doctor laughed. "If she won't, she won't, and there's an end on't," he said cheerfully, but as the days went by and fewer and fewer visitors called at Hollowdene the situation between these three people began to grow tense.

Miss Merridan's last craze had been the source of a terribly prolific crop of gossip. She had done silly things before! She had often invited odd people to stay in her luxurious house, she had rather prided herself on quixotic eccentricities. They cost a good deal sometimes, but she had plenty of money to pay with! Never, till now, had she done aught that the neighbourhood seriously took amiss. Every one knew that her fancies were not to be depended on, and that she was tiresomely apt to take offence; but ladies who are very rich, generous, and hospitable, can afford to be whimsical and rash! On this occasion alone did the husbands, fathers, and brothers of her acquaintance draw the line, and refuse to allow their womenkind to meet Dr. Wallace MacIlvert.

It was some time before Miss Merridan noticed the defection. She was so absorbed in this renewed interest, so thoroughly well entertained by her old friend come back in a new mood.

"Why does no one come to see you now, godmother?" Jeronime asked one day, and, getting no answer, for Miss Merridan was lost in dreams, she clinched the question by another, "and when is that man going away? He has stayed here nearly three weeks. No other man ever stays so long as that. He behaves as if you belonged to him, and the house too, and the garden too!"

Miss Merridan roused herself from her reverie with a start and a conscious smile.

"I have known Dr. MacIlvert for many, many years. He says there is no one in all the world who knows so much about him as I do," said she. "He has had a strange history. I cannot tell it to you, for it is not a story for a little girl's ears, and you would not understand it; but I am glad and proud to offer my hospitality to him. What better use can I make of the luxury that has often been a burden to me, than devote it to the succour and comfort of a badly used and cruelly misrepresented man?"

The last words were addressed more to herself than to Jeronime, but for once Jeronime was giving her whole attention to the subject on hand, and when she did wake up to an

interest in humanity she had a singularly direct method of procedure. Indeed, her downrightness was sometimes embarrassing.

"He is a pretty good size," she said quaintly. "He is broader than Joseph Adams" (Joseph Adams was the gardener). "I don't see who could ill-use a person like that! He ought to be able to stand up to most people. He looks very strong."

Miss Merridan laughed. "You are very childish still, my dear little Joy! There are many kinds of ill-usage in the world. I did not mean that any one had done our dear doctor bodily harm, but that he has suffered from cruel and terrible slanders."

"O—oh, you mean that people say that he has done something horrid?" said Jeronime, frowning thoughtfully. "Then I suppose that that is why no one calls here just now. They don't like him. *I* don't like him either. How do you know that he didn't do it?"

Miss Merridan fairly jumped! She was probably as much taken aback as Balaam was when his ass spoke and delivered a most unwelcome warning. Jeronime was usually so silent, so tiresomely absorbed in her garden, her rabbits, and her chickens! Miss Merridan had come to the conclusion that she was such a backward and unobservant child! It was strange that she should have put two and two together.

"I cannot encourage you to gossip. It is enough for you that I *do* know," she said. "I have good reasons for respecting Dr. MacIlvert. *You* owe him more than you imagine. The indulgent affection, which you never appreciate, your happy, sheltered home, the many gifts I have lavished on you, might never have been yours had it not been for him."

"Where did you get me, godmother?" Jeronime asked suddenly. "Of course I know that I don't really belong to you. I belong really to Mère Marthe and Maman and a place by the sea!"

It was the cry of her babyhood, repeating itself after all these years. Jeronime did not mean to be cruel, she thought that she was only stating an obvious fact, but Miss Merridan

gazed at her with tragic despair. "You have no heart, Jeronime," she cried, but Jeronime had heard that complaint too often to be impressed by it. It seemed to her quite irrelevant.

"And *how* did you get me?" she persisted. She added ruefully, and much as if she were speaking of some sample of seeds whose growth had proved disappointing, "I don't think that I've turned out right, do you? I suppose it doesn't answer to take children like that, before making sure that they are the right sort. It must be so tiresome when they grow up wrong. Why did you get me, godmother?"

Miss Merridan was spared an answer, for at this moment Dr. MacIlvert came in through the French window, and Jeronime walked out of the room.

"Something has disturbed you, my dear lady," said the doctor.

His sympathy was sweet to her, but a passing hesitation disturbed her growing dependence on it. It would be absurd to pay attention to the fancies of a child, but one remark of Jeronime's had struck her; it was quite true that since this man had stayed under her roof no one had been to see her.

He sat down by her, and very patiently (for was he not a doctor?) elicited the cause of her trouble.

"Why, I suspect that your little *protégée* does me the honour of being jealous of me, eh?" he said, with his big cheerful laugh. "Never mind! I'll be off to-morrow. It's quite true that I've stayed an unconscionable time here. It would be a thousand pities to disturb your home happiness. No doubt you are all the world to your adopted child—as you should be, as you should be! It would be odd if it were not so, after all you have given her! As for me, I can put up with a lonely life. I've been spoilt for it for a time, and that's your fault, you know, but I shall soon get used to it again!"

Lucilla Merridan's eyes filled with tears.

"But I am not all the world to my adopted child! Very far from it."

"Ah—you're lonely too," he said.

He moved his chair an inch nearer, but the voice of prudence

(which had been so flouted and despised) was reinforced by that saving instinct which warns most women when the hunter is very close to them. Miss Merridan jumped up quickly. She could not send him away to-morrow; that surely was not necessary, but she temporised, and flung a sop to Prudence—she would at any rate break this *tête-à-tête*.

"I am going to get up a little house party to meet you," she said; "you would not care for our dull county neighbours, nor do I; but I like to be hospitable to genius. I will ask Melissa Tyler to spend Saturday evening till Monday with us. She is a beautiful young American actress who is now touring with her company in Durham. Then there is Slavotsky, the Polish musician. I believe (but you must not breathe this secret to a soul) that I saved him from starvation. *He* shall come too, and bring his violin; and I know a Japanese artist who will one day be very famous, he will be charmed to join us. Will not that be a delightful 'week-end' party? Oh, of course you must stay till Monday, Doctor."

That was another sop to Prudence. She had put a limit to his visit. It should end on Monday. She applauded herself. She went to her writing-table and began to scribble notes at once. She was truly hospitable, and her spirits rose to the idea of this little party, which would be entirely composed of people who would never venture to criticise her.

"They are all sympathetic souls," she said.

The doctor smiled. They were all hungry, too, he suspected! If ever he were master, he would see that she was not imposed on.

"I'll invite Mr. Knight. Jeronime is ridiculously fond of him, and there is young Mr. Mavis. His father was my dear father's lawyer. Quentin is to be a solicitor. Dear me! it makes me feel so old when I think that Quentin Mavis is twenty-three and that I was a grown-up girl at his father's wedding."

Somehow that last reflection finally pacified Prudence for that day. For since there are undoubted drawbacks to growing old, it would be too unfair not to be allowed to reap the counterbalancing advantages.

On the Saturday Miss Merridan had to drive into Durham after breakfast. The morning was beautiful and on her plate lay grateful acceptances from the invited guests. She showed the notes to Dr. MacIlvert, who said—

"You are a dispenser of sunshine, dear lady."

That pleased her too, she liked to confer benefits. Only Mr. Knight had not answered, "And he is the one I want most!" said Jeronime. "Musicians and painters and people of that sort are so silly and tiresome. May I go and beg Mr. Knight to come, godmother?"

"Yes, if you like, dear one," said Miss Merridan absently.

She was thinking what a beautiful drive she and the doctor would have in the cool of that June morning. She did not so much as notice Jeronime's sweeping stricture on the whole company of artists.

"You are thoughtful, my friend," she said playfully, as they stood in the porch after breakfast.

"I'm thinking about your *protégée*," he said. "I am not going to drive into Durham with you. Take Miss Joy instead. She heartily dislikes me. No doubt she divines my—" he lingered a moment, and looked hard at her, "my friendship for you. Well, take the little girl and make her happy. I resign my pretensions to the place at your side this morning."

He spoke with easy good-temper, but all his energy was roused. He had observed the limit that had been put to his stay. Had Miss Jeronime had something to do with that? Very well, then, Miss Merridan should have enough of Jeronime's company to-day! Ungrateful little monkey! Well, well! his hostess would find the child's companionship extremely flat after his own, or he was much mistaken.

Miss Merridan had been a little flustered by the break in his sentence. It had been suggestive. She would not press him to accompany her, but she was disappointed. Jeronime had already betaken herself to her garden, and was frankly disgusted at having to relinquish spade and trowel and to put on a tidy frock and a pair of gloves.

"It is such a good morning for digging!" she said regret-

fully. "The ground is so nice and soft. I wish I might finish this border."

"I am sadly accustomed to your unwillingness to be with me, Jeronime, but you should at least treat my desires with some show of respect," said Miss Merridan tartly. She sometimes pulled up Jeronime sharply, and sometimes let the reins fall very slack.

Dr. MacIlvert, having watched the pony-cart out of sight, returned to the house chuckling. He knew that she was getting more than a little tired of that prescription which he had given her thirteen years ago.

He went into the library and sat down to consider the situation. How well his armchair was stuffed! How delightfully comfortable everything was! What a thousand pities it would be if he had to turn out of such excellent quarters! The amused chuckle died on his lips while he reflected. He had a strong sense of humour, but it would be no laughing matter if he failed, if he baulked this last good chance. It behoved him to be both bold and careful, and one small enemy might be more than enough to shake such a delicately-poised ladder. Jeronime was asleep to her own interests as yet, but in a year or two she would be beautiful, and beauty carries power with it. There would be knights ready to break lances at her beck and call, when she once had wakened to grasp her woman's sceptre. She might be no mean antagonist then. Dr. MacIlvert was an observant person. He had not only noted Jeronime's budding beauty, but he had an inkling of the strength of her slowly developing character. Where two live together the strongest must rule some day. Jeronime might rule her guardian in the future, that is, if she took the trouble to humour her. As yet she was as guileless as a rabbit and showed no tact, but the more he reflected the more glad he was that he had come in time.

His practical mind turned from the consideration of Jeronime's character to the consideration of her probable place in Miss Merridan's will. He wondered how that good lady had provided for her, but he had often noticed that Miss Merridan, while expansive and unreserved in matters that

pertained to her feelings, was reticent about anything that concerned business. She had had a long interview with young Mr. Mavis, and the boy had met Dr. MacIlvert in the hall and scowled fiercely at him. Quentin Mavis was a full-blown solicitor and not really a boy, but he seemed very young to the doctor, who would have liked immensely to know the reason of the scowl.

Miss Merridan's escritoire stood in the embrasure of the library window. She had left the key in the lock. It was a careless thing to do, but her wits had certainly been wool-gathering of late. Dr. MacIlvert knew that her cheque-book, pass-book, and will lay in the third drawer from the top. It is no matter how he knew so much. He was a person who acquired a good deal of miscellaneous knowledge when he stayed in a house. It is only fair to him to add that had he been left in a desert island for a fortnight he would equally have acquired a great deal of minute and accurate information about the birds, beasts, and fishes which surrounded him. His keen and tireless apprehension was only matched by his excellent and retentive memory.

The place was quiet. Miss Merridan and Jeronime must be well on their way to Durham. The servants lived in another wing of the house. Dr. MacIlvert got up and drew down the blinds of the window that looked on to the garden. The sun was streaming into the room. He reflected that Miss Merridan's carpets would be saved. Then he seated himself before the escritoire, unlocked and opened the third drawer, took out a thick envelope and investigated its contents without haste or tremor. The investigation more than repaid him. He drew his lips together in a long, low whistle as he read. He was immensely surprised. Now he knew why Quentin Mavis had scowled. Not that it could make any difference to that young ass! Now he knew that the game lay in his hand, and the knowledge gave him a most curious sensation. It was as though he had been preparing to take a vigorous upward step, had braced his muscles for it, and had then unexpectedly found that he was already on the top level. The will had been made only yesterday, and after legacies to the servants and a

substantial provision for Jeronime, it left the bulk of the money "to Dr. Wallace MacIlvert in reparation of a great injustice, and in token of a faithful and enduring friendship."

"Well, well! One never knows what a woman mayn't do!" he muttered, and his hand actually shook a little as he re-read that astonishing document. He was so overcome by his sensations that the breath was fairly knocked out of him, and for once his quick ears played him false! He never heard a footstep in the hall, and he was caught by some one who stood at the open door.

Jeronime faced him, holding the handle of the door in her hand, and staring at him with big, indignant eyes.

"What can you be doing there?" said she.

CHAPTER X

DR. MACILVERT pulled his wits together with wonderful rapidity. He was not a quick-tempered man, but at that moment a slow anger with this girl began to smoulder.

"Well, as you see," said he, with a slight assumption of offence at her tone—"as you see, I am putting something very carefully away in Miss Merridan's escritoire. It is a something that is far too valuable to be left out." He deliberately made a motion as though he were depositing something at the bottom of the open drawer, and then put back the will apparently on the top of it. The action gave him time to invent. "It is something I picked up on the gravel path after you drove away," and he shut the drawer as he spoke.

Jeronime still stood bewildered, puzzled and yet quite unbelieving.

"But you were not putting something away. You were reading a long paper!" she blurted out at last.

Dr. MacIlvert shrugged his shoulders. "Will you forgive me if I tell you plainly that you are just a little too old to be allowed to give a man the lie?" said he. "One puts up with the rudeness of a baby, you know, but at sixteen——"

"*Seventeen*," said Jeronime.

He relapsed into his good-tempered, hearty laugh. "Oh, seventeen, is it? To be sure, I ought to have known; but you are not so old that to mention your age is unpardonable! Seventeen, to be sure! Thirteen years since your mother—but there, never mind."

Jeronime flushed as she had flushed when she had first met him in the hall. She clapped her little sunburnt hands to her forehead, as if trying to catch and hold an elusive memory.

"Oh, I so want to know about Maman! I am sure *you* know. Tell me!" she cried.

He had successfully distracted her attention. She was but a child after all. "Tell me," she cried, but then checked herself. "No; I ought not to ask you. I won't ask you."

The doctor was half amused in spite of the fright she had given him.

"Why, little Eve, what do you want to know?" said he.

"My name is not Eve. I am Jeronime Joy," she said bluntly. Then very gravely, and after a moment's pause, "Eve did ask the serpent questions, but I am not going to ask you," and for the life of him, and clever though he was, Dr. MacIlvert was not quite sure whether that last arrow was aimed with intention or no.

"Did you have a pleasant drive? Where is Miss Merridan?" he asked, with a cheerful change of subject.

He did not appear to be in the least ashamed or disconcerted. A much more sophisticated girl than Jeronime might have been overawed by his frank composure, and might have felt that she must have been ridiculously mistaken in her suspicion. Jeronime did not suspect; she was quite sure! The most excellent acting in the world had no effect on her.

"Miss Merridan is still driving to Durham. I got out," she replied.

That, at least, was a relief to him. He had time to put matters straight.

"Did you fall out by the way, Miss Joy?" he asked, with a twinkle of fun in his eyes. He suspected that they had 'fallen out" in another sense, and the surmise amused him.

"Will you please give me godmother's keys? I'll take care of them till she comes in," said Jeronime.

He gave them to her with a smile, though he would have preferred to have kept possession of them. It would not do to dispute that point, but what a tiresome child this was!

"You're a funny little watch-dog, but you should learn not to bark at the wrong people," he said, and would have patted her shoulder, after a half-fatherly fashion (for it was best to

take the episode as a childish freak), but Jeronime drew back.

"Don't! Oh, I *don't* like you!" she cried.

"My dear young lady," said the doctor, "you need never take the trouble to state your dislikes in so many words. They are always quite obvious. It is a pity to be gratuitously rude. Even the loveliest woman—and you'll soon be a woman, you know—can't afford it." He looked hard at her; she was very pretty, with those bright, indignant eyes and the flush on her round cheeks. It would have served her right—but no! he wouldn't be a fool, too much was at stake. "We are only flesh and blood, and it provokes reprisals!" he said, and so left her alone.

Jeronime's cheeks burnt more than ever. She had not understood what he had meant, but she had felt furiously angry and ashamed.

"I hate men—they are horrid—all except dear Mr. Knight," she said. Then locked the escritoire and escaped with a sigh of relief into the garden.

It was evidently an unlucky day. First she had vexed godmother, then she had had this highly unpleasant scene with that horrid man, who seemed inclined to stay for ever. What had he been doing at his hostess's escritoire? Was he stealing her money? or was he so intensely inquisitive that he had been seized with a desire to read all her private papers? One of the traits which Jeronime disliked in him was his inquisitiveness. He did not ask many questions, but she always felt that he knew too much about every one!

Dr. MacIlvert had called her a "little watch-dog," and there was in truth a kind of watch-dog fidelity and loyalty in her. The more she thought over that odd scene, the less she liked it, and at last she turned her steps to that sure refuge, the Yellow House. For "it is a good thing to have a friend," said she.

Mr. Knight was sitting in his study immersed in congenial work. For the last eight years he had been engaged in writing the chronicles of the De Grouchys. He had begun the task entirely for his own satisfaction, and with no idea of publishing; but, as the book grew in bulk, he liked to

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imagine that it would be a very interesting addition to history, and a valuable present to the family whose place he had for a time usurped, but whose descendants would again come into their own one day. In his heart of heart he knew that they would return. They had sold the house before, but they had always returned.

It was a curious book and bid fair to be very voluminous, for Mr. Knight omitted nothing. He had spared neither trouble nor expense in his researches. He had looked up old registers, he had deciphered old letters; he was a mine of recondite and varied information on his subject. He had had a good deal of correspondence with James de Grouchy, who was perfectly willing to make over to him all the family records he possessed, and who had even supplied him with a few "oral traditions" which may or may not have been invented for the occasion. Mr. Knight entered every detail, but his manuscript had withal a specious air of correctness. His business habit showed in it, and overlaid the product of a really lively fancy in a most misleading manner. He never failed to put dates clearly, and to make one story dovetail neatly into another. No one on first reading his naïvely simple and circumstantial accounts of startling events would have guessed that he occasionally romanced. He did not guess it himself. Jeronime alone ventured to disturb him in his study in the morning, and even she entered apologetically.

"I know that you are busy, and that you do not want to see me so early in the day," she said, coming in rather shyly, and yet with the confidence of one who was in reality sure of her welcome, "but then I want to see you so very much. I have something quite important to say. You don't really mind my having come, do you?"

"No, my dear," said Mr. Knight. "You are always welcome in your own house, you know."

He pushed aside his papers and went to meet her with a kind smile, but Jeronime gave him her hand very gravely. She was often grave at Hollowdene, but at the Yellow House she was oftener merry. Her soberness did not melt even at his time-honoured jest.

"What can be the matter? Have those new cuttings turned out badly?" said Mr. Knight.

"No, it has nothing to do with my garden. I almost think it is more important," said she.

He made her sit down and returned to his armchair and began to arrange his papers. He never hurried Jeronime He saw that she was very much disturbed, and he wondered what was coming. So few things were more important to her than her beloved garden.

"I want to ask you a serious question," she said solemnly, at last. "Supposing that you felt sure some one was a bad person, and that then one day you caught the bad person doing a bad thing, should you or should you not go to your godmother and tell tales of him? Of course you would have to remember that you always managed to vex her, and that she liked the bad person, and that she always believed what she wished to believe, and that you never could help being rather stupid, even when you were trying not to be, so that whatever you said was sure to be just the wrong thing. You'd have to remember all that. Also that there are lots of mean, grabbing, story-telling people who tell nasty little things about other people to godmother, and try to get the better of each other, and that whatever happened, you never meant to be one of them. You would rather be dead than be like that!"

"Who has been doing what?" said Mr. Knight.

He had not so much as heard of the gossip rife about Dr. MacIlvert, but he knew well enough that Miss Merridan was surrounded by toadies and fortune-hunters at times. The knowledge made him angry with her for Jeronime's sake. Had he adopted the child, he would have been more careful about who came near her.

Jeronime let the question drop unanswered and shook her head. He liked her silence and respected it.

"I am no advocate for tale-bearing," he said, "but if the action you saw were of such a kind as entailed, or might possibly entail, any injury on Miss Merridan, then I hold that you are bound to tell her. If that is not the case I should

strongly advise you to forget all about it as quickly as possible, my dear."

Jeronime reflected again, and then sighed heavily. "What a bother! I hate a fuss! I wish you had decided the other way," said she; "but thank you very much for telling me what you would do. You see, I know you are most likely to be right. It's very lucky we are friends, isn't it? For *me*, I mean, for of course I never can be of any use to you."

She smiled at last, and Jeronime when she smiled was beautiful. Mr. Knight did not return the compliment, but he looked at his dear little lady as he sometimes looked at the Yellow House when the setting sun bathed it in warm colour.

"There is something else I had to say—I had nearly forgotten," she cried. "Do, *do* please say that you will dine with us to-night. You have never answered, you know! Your De Grouchy book does make you forget what is happening now, doesn't it, Mr. Knight?"

"Dear me! I am very remiss," said Mr. Knight. "Did I not reply to Miss Merridan's note? How unpardonable of me! I had an idea that I had written to explain that I could not come."

"Oh, but don't explain that you can't," she begged earnestly. "I want you so very much. I shall not so mind having to dine downstairs if you are at dinner."

"I shall have much pleasure in accepting Miss Merridan's kind invitation if she will pardon my apparent discourtesy," said Mr. Knight.

He glanced wistfully at the pile of papers which he would be obliged to leave, but was rewarded by Jeronime's brightening face.

"I do not really know what I should do without you," she said gravely, and that was more than she had ever said to any one else in the world!

She went home partially comforted, and with a mind made up.

As for the doctor, he realised that without doubt the situation was awkward. The realisation made him a trifle

desperate. He was angry with himself, and angry with Jeronime.

"There's no going back. I must get the better of this. Play up, doctor; play up! Don't you be beaten now by an obstinate baby of a girl."

He addressed himself cheerfully and encouragingly, for he had no friend besides himself in all the wide world, unless he counted Lucilla Merridan as such. He thought of her with something approaching affection. "If she sticks to me now—and she is fool enough for anything—I will be very kind to her when we are married. After all, she shan't repent it—no, upon my oath she shan't," he promised himself; and he was not a man who deceived his conscience with many promises. Indeed, it was not of a very exacting or sensitive kind, and I fear it did not trouble him as frequently as should have been the case.

He looked at his watch. There was not too much time to spare. Then he went straight to his hostess's bedroom. It was a very pretty room, and there was a great display of silver on the Louis XV. dressing-table, which had once graced a French palace. Dr. MacIlvert felt rather like a burglar. For once he was slightly ashamed, but he set his teeth and went on. A little old-fashioned paste brooch and two ruby-headed pins lay on a silver tray on the dressing-table. He hesitated for a second between them, then he remembered that she usually wore the paste brooch fastening the old lace in which she delighted. She had worn it at breakfast-time. It was of no great value, but the design was good. He slid it into his pocket and went downstairs. He meant, if possible, to put the proof of his story into that drawer of the escritoire before Jeronime and Miss Merridan met, but he could not be sure that that "little watch-dog" was not still on guard in the library, and it would not do to risk a second encounter. He must bide his time.

Miss Merridan returned earlier than he had expected. She had hurried over her shopping. The brooch was still in his pocket. When she saw the doctor sitting in the drawing-room her clouded face brightened.

"I have had a miserable, disappointing morning," she told him.

"Indeed! Now that's odd, for I've found the day dull too," said he; "but I had a fancy that that was because you had taken all the sunshine with you. You look tired, my dear lady."

Lucilla smiled. "Oh, it is so very pleasant to come back to a little sympathy," she cried.

She made rather large demands on his sympathy one way and another. She found it of excellent quality. It was never vapid, or cloying, or fatigued, and it was sometimes seasoned with a spice of virile common sense and humour. It had a flavour of admiration, and of what she was pleased to call friendship. It was not supplied gratis, for he intended some day to take full payment for it, and he had always known how to charge full price—he did not undervalue his services. Miss Merridan, however, did not take that side of the question into account.

"Jeronime was so evidently unwilling to accompany me that I told her that I wished for no unwilling companionship, and that she might get out and go back if she preferred her garden to me! I was right, was I not? I want no grudging service!"

"So out she got, eh?" said he, laughing. "Well, well, she's a remarkable young woman! Not overburdened with gratitude, perhaps, nor too mindful of any one's feelings, but a very remarkable young woman. She as good as told me that I was a rascal just now."

Miss Merridan's eyes flashed and she bit her lip. She was more displeased with Jeronime than she had ever been before.

"But this is too much! I have over-indulged the child till she becomes insufferable!" she cried. "She shall make an apology to you; I will insist on it."

"No, no; don't do that!" said he. "When people get maggots in their brains it's wiser not to take too much notice. But I'll tell you what happened. You remember I stood on the gravel path and watched you out of sight this morning (it's a trick I find I have acquired, somehow I generally *do* watch you out of sight), then I turned to go indoors, but you

seemed to have left one little spark of light behind you. Something was shining at my feet—I picked up your diamond brooch."

"My diamond brooch? Oh, you mean that little old paste ornament. I did not know that I had it on this morning."

"I'm afraid you are very careless, my dear lady," said he; "it was fastening your lace. Well, I put it in my pocket, but presently I thought it would be safer if I were to deposit it inside your escritoire. I found a drawer unlocked—yes, certainly you are very careless—and I lifted some papers in order to place it carefully underneath them. Miss Joy found me in the act of so doing. I believe that she imagined that I was stealing bank-notes. Do you keep bank-notes in your unlocked drawers, by the way?"

Miss Merridan laughed. No one but the doctor would have dared call her to account for carelessness.

"But Jeronime must be mad," she said.

"Mad or sane, she hates me," said he, "and that fact does not trouble me at all, my dear lady, for so long as you don't follow its example the opinion of the rest of the world seems quite tolerably immaterial."

"I must own to you that she is an extraordinarily stubborn child," said Miss Merridan hurriedly, for that last sentence rather alarmed her.

She did not want him to advance too quickly. She fancied that she had not made up her mind. She would make the conversation turn on Jeronime, not on herself. It was a relief to her to discuss Jeronime. She poured forth the tale of her disappointment at great length. The doctor attended as patiently as he would have attended to the description of a patient's symptoms.

Then the luncheon bell rang and they went into the dining-room, and Jeronime came in rather late, and with cheeks glowing from her walk.

"I've been to see Mr. Knight, godmother. I've persuaded him to come to-night!" she said triumphantly. "He was going to refuse, but I told him I wanted him so very much, so then he said 'Yes.'"

"Another time you need not add invitations of your own

to my invitation," said Miss Merridan. "If Mr. Knight did not wish to dine with me I certainly have no desire to press him to come."

"Oh!" said Jeronime. "I thought you would have been pleased!" She was disappointed, and she shook her head gravely at herself as she sat down to table.

Godmother was never pleased with her nowadays. She recognised the fact slowly but surely. She would not "tell" about the doctor till to-morrow, she decided.

"I am sure godmother will be angry with me if I tell her to-day. It will remind her of how she stopped the chaise and said, 'You had better get out and go home if you prefer your garden to me.' I wish I had not got out directly. I did not finish my digging after all, and I would much rather not have caught that wicked thief. Godmother won't like sending him to prison, and I suppose that is what will have to happen," thought she.

The guests arrived immediately after lunch, and Miss Merridan had no opportunity either to rebuke or question Jeronime on the subject of the brooch. She might perhaps have made an opportunity had she greatly wished for one, but for once she was inclined to shrink from a scene. She was angry, so disproportionately angry, that though she was usually quick to express her feelings, she now felt startled and almost terrified by them.

Dr. MacIlvert spent an anxious afternoon. Jeronime and Rowland were busy arranging flowers for the dinner-table. They arranged them in the library, and took a very long time about it, for Jeronime was never quick over anything, and she and Rowland were not quite of one mind about how flowers should be put in water.

The gong for dressing sounded, and Jeronime ran upstairs. At last the room was clear. Dr. MacIlvert hastily remembered that he had left a book there. He went straight to the escritoire, brooch in hand, but, as he had feared, it was locked, and the keys were in Jeronime Joy's pocket.

"Still, I *must* win," he said to himself. "One way or another, I must win."

CHAPTER XI

MR. KNIGHT arrived punctually in time for dinner at Hollowdene. He was a very punctual person, and he was much ashamed of himself for his lapse of memory about Miss Merridan's invitation. He owned to himself that his absorption in those old chronicles, his constant dwelling in the past had, no doubt, put him slightly out of tune with the present. He must brush up and mend his manners.

He apologised elaborately to his hostess, and while he sat quietly chatting to her, he wondered which of his fellow-guests could possibly have done "the very bad thing" of which his little friend had spoken.

Surely not young Mavis? Young Mavis, with the round face like a cherub, and the sleepy, pretty grey eyes, and the almost affectedly quiet manner which he put on in company? No, it could not be young Mavis.

He liked the looks of that burly doctor too (who appeared decidedly the better for his three weeks' good living), whose cheerful personality struck him as refreshingly manly in juxtaposition with the wild, melancholy Polish musician and the funny, acute little Japanese. Though Mr. Knight had a curious taste for the gossip of some hundred years ago, he had no liking whatever for current scandal, which he despised as he despised new port; consequently he had heard nothing of the whispers rife about Dr. MacIlvert and his hostess, and met him for the first time with an unbiassed mind. No, he did not fancy that broad-shouldered, frank-mannered Scotchman could be the culprit.

It was not the actress, though she kept them all waiting for

dinner while she completed her toilet, which was a bad action in itself. Jeronime had spoken of the bad thing *he* had done. On the whole, Mr. Knight was inclined to suspect the Pole, I fear chiefly because he was a foreigner, and because he wore his hair too long!

There were five men and three ladies present. Miss Merridan made pretty excuses for the uneven proportion.

"You see, this is not a party, it is only a meeting of some of my dearest friends," she said. "Dear Mr. Knight, I must ask you to sit at the bottom of the table for me, and to take Miss Tylor in to dinner. Jeronime will sit on your left. You are always so kind to Jeronime."

Jeronime greeted him with unfeigned pleasure and relief. "Isn't it lucky for me that you are here?" she said in an undertone. "I do so hate having to speak to strange people. When Miss Melissa Tylor is talking to Mr. Slavotsky you will talk to me, won't you? I am afraid that will be rather dull for you though," she added candidly.

"I shall be quite content, my dear," said Mr. Knight.

Jeronime smiled gratefully at him. "Well, I thought you wouldn't mind, though of course you ought to have a quite grown-up lady on either side."

"I sometimes sadly fear that you will soon be quite grown up yourself," said Mr. Knight.

He looked attentively at her, and Jeronime nodded wisely. "I know what makes you say that. When they are all busy chattering I'll tell you something."

She waited till dinner had well begun, then confided in him under cover of the clatter of knives and forks. "My white frock has grown too tight across my chest lately, and much too short in the sleeves. You see, I have not worn it in the last three months, because godmother has not been very—very pleased with me, and I have not often dined downstairs. To-night I did not know how to squeeze into it. I had to call Rowland to help me, and she was so cross, but I can't help growing, can I? We left the first four buttons unfastened, and folded it in at the neck, and pinned a muslin scarf of godmother's over it, and Rowland cut my sleeves off at the

elbow and tacked in these lace frills. It makes it into a much older sort of dress, but I think it's pretty, don't you? Should you have guessed that we have done all that?"

"No; I never should have ventured to suspect it," said Mr. Knight.

The folded-in frock showed her round neck, and her arms were very pretty, though the tan of her hands made her look almost as if she had brown gloves on. It occurred to Mr. Knight that it would be a great pleasure to clasp pearls on Jeronime's neck, white against warm, living white. Why should he not gratify the whim? He had always given her many presents."

"'Miss Jeronime Joy, she likes a new toy,' *still*, eh?" said he.

Jeronime laughed affectionately at the oft-quoted couplet. "I am getting too old for toys, but there *are* things I want."

"For example?" said he.

"That new kind of spud for getting up dandelion roots," said Jeronime promptly, and somewhat to his disappointment. Then she sighed. "But godmother says that I am too fond of my garden."

"Well, well, it may be that she is right," said Mr. Knight, whose theoretical views about girls would have fitted the time of Miss Edgeworth. "Young ladies must not behave like tomboys, and perhaps she requires the pleasure of your company."

Jeronime shook her head. "No, I am never a pleasure; I am a pain to godmother. I have been thinking a great deal lately, and I know that I am the wrong kind of person for her. It is a great pity, because she has spent so much money on me. She sees it herself, but I don't know how it can be helped now, do you? Poor godmother never *is* lucky! She always says so! She gets dreadfully disappointed, you know."

Mr. Knight laughed, but not altogether mirthfully. "I do not see that there is so much amiss with you, Jerry."

"No; but that is because you did not adopt me," she said, "so of course you don't expect so much. Most likely, if you had adopted me, you would be disappointed too."

He looked at her with quickened attention. Jeronime was seldom sad, but he fancied he detected a note of sadness in that last remark. Somehow the turned-in frock hardly seemed entirely accountable for the change in her.

"Hadn't you better talk to Miss Melissa Tylor now?" she said. "Godmother will say I am not very polite if I take up all your time."

He wondered, as he obediently turned his attention to his other neighbour, whether this unusual carefulness was another sign that the child was "growing up." Through all the pretty actress's bright chatter he heard with one ear whenever Jeronime laughed at anything that young Mavis said. She had a musical, low-pitched laugh, perfectly natural and child-like and hearty. Mr. Knight usually liked to hear it, but to-night it made him irritable; for it struck him that young Mavis was really saying such idiotic things. Did he suppose himself to be humorous?

Yet after dinner, when they all met again in the drawing-room, Mr. Knight's ill-humour vanished when Jeronime came and stood beside him and slid her fingers into his, like the child she still was in part; for she stood at that entrancing but uncomfortable place where the child and the woman meet, and now she was one, and then suddenly, for rare moments, the other.

Miss Merridan had started a "willing" and "thought-reading" *séance*, and Jeronime and Mr. Knight remained apart and outside the circle.

"I hate people who try to peer inside my mind," she said indignantly. "Why do they like such nasty games? It's as bad as trying to peep through keyholes or into desks. You won't let Dr. MacIlvert come peeping into me, will you? I may stay close by you, mayn't I?"

"Why, Jerry!" said Mr. Knight, "you take the game too seriously. It is only a bit of nonsense to pass away the time. No one can force the door of your mind without your consent. Have you a guilty conscience, little miss, that you are so afraid of invasion?"

Jeronime shook her head, but with a troubled look. "No,

I have not," she said, "but," in a low voice, "*he* isn't good. I don't like him! I wish godmother would send him right away. I think he will do some harm. He is so dreadfully—*knowledgeable*. Is that the right word? Before he had been with us a fortnight he found out that Rowland had something the matter with her, that had frightened her so much that she could not bear to tell any one about it. And he got her to talk to him, and he persuaded her it was not what she thought, and she looks years younger now, and is devoted to him. Yes, I know what you are going to say—'that was kind and nice of him.' So it was, but he always understands too much about every one, and I don't like it. People who know so much ought to be very good, or else they are dreadful. I don't like him anywhere near me. How can godmother let him do that?"

She shuddered. Mr. Knight, following the direction of her eyes, was somewhat surprised.

"Willing" was in full swing now, and Dr. MacIlvert was performing most successful feats. The Japanese artist's narrow eyes were twinkling attentively; the Polish musician was tragically out of temper; Miss Melissa Tylor laughed and clapped; Quentin Mavis looked on stolidly. Miss Merridan was playing the part of medium, and certainly the results were astonishing. Over and over again the doctor willed her to choose. Now it was a flower from the vase on the mantelpiece, now a card from the pack that lay on the table, now letters from the ivory heap that smelt so sweet of sandalwood. Over and over again she unhesitatingly caught the "thought." She looked her handsomest as she swept in and out of the circle, with a glow on her cheek.

"You respond directly. That is because you are so highly strung," said the doctor. He had often laughed at her leaning to the occult and her love of dabbling in half-unexplored byways, but he was diverted by the game too.

"I wish she wouldn't," said little Jeronime, frowning.

Miss Merridan's slender white fingers fluttered over the ivory letters. She spelt "Faith" and "Fidelity" and "Goodness" for the doctor, and there was a murmur of applause as she held

out her hand with each word complete. Mr. Knight was amused at his neighbour's pranks.

"Dear me! dear me! All such fine pretty words, eh, my dear?" said he. "Why, we did this kind of thing when I was a lad! It's a very old story, and more fitted for lads and lasses perhaps," he added to himself.

"Godmother should make Dr. MacIlvert spell 'cheat' and 'thief,'" said Jeronime indignantly.

Unluckily a sudden lull had fallen on the circle at that moment. Her fresh, indignant young voice carried farther than she intended: it carried right into the midst of the "willers." She seemed to have flung a stone. Every one "jumped."

"How dare you say such things! You—you forget yourself, Jeronime," cried Miss Merridan.

She had been about to spell "Charity," which every one knows is the synonym for "Love," but now she tore the bandage from her eyes with fingers that shook with anger.

There was a moment's tense silence. Mr. Knight's hold on Jeronime's hand tightened. A sense of elation made his blood tingle. He was much nearer sixty than fifty, but he said to himself with grim elation that even an old and tough knight might not prove altogether useless in default of younger champions. The pun pleased him. He would repeat it to his little lady to-morrow! Yet he was quite in earnest.

Jeronime blushed crimson—a painful, hot blush that stained her neck and forehead.

"I didn't mean to speak so loud. Indeed, godmother, I did not mean any one but Mr. Knight to hear," she said.

Dr. MacIlvert rose to the occasion with moderation and dignity.

"I am so unfortunate as to have evoked this young lady's dislike," he said gravely. "I do not wish to make a to-do in my kind hostess's drawing-room, especially since Miss Joy says that she did not intend her remark to be *pro bono publico*. At the same time, 'cheat' and 'thief' are not words without meaning that can be thrown casually about."

"His speech is so like that of honesty," thought Mr.

Knight, "that if he is not honest he is a most accomplished rogue."

Quentin Mavis moved out of the circle and stood close to Jeronime on her other side. The girl's flush had faded, leaving her rather white.

"But you know quite well what I mean," she said almost childishly.

"This is quite unpardonable. Jeronime, I insist——" began Miss Merridan in a high, excited voice, when Mr. Knight interrupted her.

His precise pronunciation and slow speech made her so impatient that she longed to scream, and with difficulty restrained herself, but Jeronime was grateful to him; he gave her time to collect her thoughts.

"Miss Joy has explained that she intended to express her opinion only to me, who am her very old friend," said he. "But I am sure that she is not in the habit of accusing any one groundlessly. I think that since you all overheard what she said, she will do wisely to tell you all why she said it." He turned to Jeronime; his confidence in her courage was founded on close observation, and it was unfaltering.

"I think that you must give your reasons very plainly, my dear," he said.

"But I cannot allow my guest and friend to be insulted—even by a foolish child," said Miss Merridan.

"Dear lady, let the little girl tell us all what it is she has in her mind against me," said the doctor. "It cannot possibly harm me, and it is far better that she should speak out."

He certainly had not expected to have to fight for his footing this very evening! He could have wished that Miss Jeronime had chosen a moment when he and she and Miss Merridan were alone in the house. Who would have supposed that she would dare attack him publicly? Yet when his back was against the wall, he always fought hard and without a sign of dismay. His tone was good-humouredly contemptuous.

Miss Merridan looked with displeasure at Jeronime. "What have you to say?" she asked.

Jeronime, thus adjured, stared straight in front of her, and spoke.

"This is what happened, godmother. I came straight home after I got out of the pony-cart this morning. I had left a roll of twine in the library. I wanted it to tie up some cuttings. I went into the library to look for it. When I had opened the door I saw Dr. MacIlvert sitting at your escritoire. He had opened it, and had taken out a long envelope that was in it. That was why I called him a thief just now. When I said, 'What can you be doing there?' he tried to make me believe that he had been putting something away, which he had picked up outside. It was not true. He wasn't putting anything away when I opened the door. There was nothing in his hand except the envelope. That is why I think he is a cheat."

She delivered herself of this plain statement in short sentences, with a very full stop between each. Her mind did not work quickly, but she was conscientiously set on speaking the whole and exact truth.

Dr. MacIlvert smiled at his hostess. "You have already heard the true version of this story," he said. "You remember that I told you how I had picked up your diamond brooch on the path, and had placed it, for greater safety, in the drawer of your escritoire."

"Of course I remember!" she said eagerly. Her colour came and went rapidly. She felt, poor woman, that she could not bear to find herself mistaken in him. Alas! she could better bear to find himself mistaken in the girl she had brought up, who was to have been "as her own child.'

"May I ask whether you have already looked in your escritoire, and found your brooch where Dr. MacIlvert placed it?" said Mr. Knight quietly.

"No, I have not; I was in no hurry to look for it, knowing that it was perfectly safe!" said she. "Dr. MacIlvert mentioned the circumstance to me just before luncheon. After luncheon I welcomed my friends on their arrival. My brooch is still where Dr. MacIlvert kindly put it." She turned to the doctor with a superb gesture of confidence.

"Would you mind fetching it, doctor? Not to show *me*, but to show to Mr. Knight and Jeronime."

"With your permission I will do that," said Mr. Knight. "Perhaps Mr. Mavis will come with me, for my eyes are older than they were. Which drawer did you put it in? The third from the top. Thank you; we shall doubtless find it there."

He spoke to the doctor with grave politeness, but he and Quentin Mavis looked at each other when the door had closed on them. The young man's usually sleepy eyes had a spark in them.

"That fellow's a fraud. We shan't find that brooch," he said.

"We *shall* find it, or I am greatly mistaken," said Mr. Knight. "He is playing boldly, and he has had time enough since luncheon to hide a shopful of jewels in Miss Merridan's desk. What we find will not alter my opinion a jot. I believe in Miss Joy. I have known her since she was three years old."

They went into the library, and turned on the electric light. Quentin Mavis tried to open the escritoire; it was locked. They returned to the drawing-room, where Miss Merridan awaited them with an eagerness which she could scarcely control.

"Will you give us your keys? The thing is locked," said Mr. Knight.

"My keys? Where are they? I do not remember where they are!" she cried distractedly.

Jeronime gave an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, I forgot to give them back to you, godmother! They are in the pocket of my morning frock still. It is hanging up in my bedroom cupboard.

"Indeed! You had better run upstairs to get them," said Miss Merridan.

There was something approaching dislike in the glance she cast at the girl. It seemed to her that Jeronime had taken great liberties that day.

When Jeronime had found the keys the two men went again to the library and searched the escritoire thoroughly.

"Not there! He is not quite so clever as we supposed," said Quentin Mavis. "He was only bluffing. But will even Miss Merridan stand this?"

Miss Merridan was walking about the room restlessly. Miss Melissa Tylor was talking and laughing bravely; every one was more or less nervous, except the doctor, who leant against the chimney-piece with an air of amused expectation. Jeronime sat by herself in a corner. She gave the impression of having done her part and being out of the game now.

"We cannot find the brooch," said Mr. Knight, and the doctor started visibly.

"But it must be there, man! I put it there," he cried; "I'll stake my honour on it!" He seemed to lose his self-control for the first time. "I know that it is there. You didn't look properly; look again."

His voice sounded thick and husky. He did not pretend that the news was not a shock to him.

"We both looked very thoroughly. There is no need to look again," said Quentin Mavis.

"Nonsense! You only half did it," cried Dr. MacIlvert angrily.

Mr. Knight was surprised; he had fancied the fellow would have carried the matter off better. He made no retort, for there was no doubt that the doctor was in an awkward place.

"Did you happen to mention to any one that Dr. MacIlvert had picked up your brooch, and had put it in the drawer of your escritoire?" he asked, turning to Miss Merridan. His love of fair-play was ingrained.

She shook her head. "To no one! I believed that, besides myself, only Dr. MacIlvert and Jeronime knew of the incident. Yet if the brooch is not where he put it, some one has stolen it. I will go myself to look."

She swept half across the room towards the door, but the doctor made a quick movement to intercept her.

"No, no! What's the use of that? I spoke hastily; I was taken by surprise—but, of course, I trust these gentlemen. The brooch is not there? Well, I've no explanation to offer! This is beyond me!"

Mr. Knight almost liked him at that moment. "Miss Merridan's suggestion may possibly be correct. The brooch may have been stolen," he said gravely.

"*Might* have been had not the escritoire been locked, and the key in Miss Joy's pocket," put in Quentin Mavis.

They seemed to have come to a deadlock. Apparently there was no more to be said or done for the moment. Mr. Knight stooped and mechanically picked up a small table that the doctor had knocked over when he sprang forward. It was an insecure, three-legged affair that usually stood to the left of the fireplace. Jeronime's workbox had been placed on it, and the overthrown contents were scattered on the hearthrug. Even in most melodramatic moments of life trivial and comic elements obtrude themselves. Mr. Knight smiled in the midst of this extraordinary situation when he found that Jeronime's workbox contained packets of seeds, a large knife of many blades, a bundle of flower-labels, and a green apple! Then his smile became fixed, and he straightened himself with a jerk.

"Jeronime!" he cried.

The girl ran to his side, startled by something strange in the sound of his voice.

Mr. Knight stretched out his hand, and on the palm of it lay the old paste brooch.

"This has just fallen out of Miss Joy's workbox," he said.

Miss Merridan sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

"Jeronime—how could you!" she murmured.

A great surging sense of relief, a choking, overpowering emotion was sweeping away the last remnants of her self-control. Tears were running down her cheeks, and flowing through her fingers. She fancied she was miserable. "How could you! how could you, Joy!" she murmured again, but her heart was singing to itself. "Then I may believe in him! It is not he; it is only the child who has deceived me."

"Out of my workbox!" said Jeronime. She repeated the words wonderingly. "Out of my workbox! But how could it have got in there?"

The doctor sat down quietly by Miss Merridan's side.

"We have had more than enough excitement to-night," he said. "Our dear hostess can bear no more. It is time some one considered her. We will let this miserable puzzle alone till to-morrow morning."

He had the best of it, there was no gainsaying that; and there was no gainsaying the inadvisability of pursuing investigations with their hostess sobbing as if her heart would break!

"I'd better ring for Rowland," said Jeronime. "She'll know what to do for godmother."

She rang accordingly, and Miss Merridan was conveyed upstairs by her sympathetic and very inquisitive attendant. The doctor followed her out of the room, and Mr. Knight and Mr. Mavis had perforce to take their leave.

Mr. Knight held Jeronime's hand a moment in his, but looked not at her, but at the company.

"Good-night, my dear. Whoever put that trinket into your work-box is a very great scoundrel," he said. "That is my opinion, and I do not fancy it will be shaken. I shall come to see you to-morrow morning, and I hope that you will not be troubled or anxious."

"I am not, thank you," said Jeronime. "Godmother was very much upset, but she *is* easily upset, you know, because her nerves are very delicate. It is a good thing, anyhow, that that brooch is safe. . . ."

Quentin Mavis also shook hands with her more warmly than usual. "I agree with every word that Mr. Knight has said," said he.

It did not appear to Jeronime that it mattered whether he agreed or not.

It was not till she was in her night-gown, and saying her prayers by the bedside, that the truth began to dawn on her.

"Why, it looked almost as if I had hidden that brooch! That was why Mr. Knight spoke so funnily. That was why Quentin Mavis said he agreed with him, but I must finish my prayers."

She finished them, duly winding up with an obstinate petition for Mère Marthe and Maman, which she had insisted on

clinging to all her life, and which she still repeated in Breton French. Then she crept into bed, but could not sleep for what seemed to her a long time. She was unusually excited and perturbed.

"Who ever put that trinket into your workbox is a very great scoundrel." How loud and clear Mr. Knight had spoken, and he had held her hand so tight that had she worn rings like Miss Merridan, they would have run into her! Who could have put it there? Dr. MacIlvert? He was the only scoundrel she knew. A person who could open some one else's escritoire and read some one else's papers might be capable of anything. But why put it into her workbox? Did he want people to think she had stolen it? But surely no one could think anything so absurd. "Even godmother must know that *I* should never wish to have a diamond brooch. Why, what should I do with it? I should be sure to lose it! I don't care for ornaments. Godmother knows that quite well," thought Jeronime. "But how she cried, and how dreadfully anxious she was when Mr. Knight went to look for that tiresome brooch. She wanted them to find it where he said he had put it." Jeronime sat up in bed, with wide-open eyes.

"Why, godmother thinks that they did not find it there, because *I* had taken it to spite him! That was what he meant everybody to think. That was why Mr. Knight was so angry. I don't care! How silly of godmother! but she always believes what she wants to believe."

With that last reflection Jeronime felt discouraged. In the safe shelter of the darkness slow tears welled up in her eyes.

"Godmother would rather that it was I who was bad, than that it was Dr. MacIlvert who was bad," she said to herself. She resolutely put these irksome and melancholy thoughts aside. "Anyhow, I've got Mr. Knight for my friend, and I suppose somewhere there is God, who knows everything. They both understand," she told herself, and then, hearing midnight strike, was shocked to be still awake, and, resting on that last comfortable reflection, laid her head on her pillow and was sound asleep before the quarter.

CHAPTER XII

SILENCE stalked between Mr. Knight and Quintin Mavis as they passed from the too intense atmosphere of the drawing-room into the quietness of the starlit garden. It was very fresh and sweet out of doors. Mr. Knight felt the flame of his unaccustomed wrath die down under the cooling touch of healing Night, and in the shadow of her vast curtain. We splutter and quarrel; then our match lights go out; and above and beyond the myriad worlds roll on, and in His sight a thousand years are as a day. So Mr. Knight felt, so indeed most of us feel when we stand under a night sky; the flame of his excitement sank, but the stiller glow of his indignation was alive. For though we be creatures of a day, yet righteousness and unrighteousness are everlasting, and he was righteously indignant.

Neither man chased away silence till they were clear of the Hollowdene grounds. When the gate clanged behind them, they glanced back at the brightly gleaming windows of the drawing-room, and their tongues were loosened.

"Our ways lie together as far as my house," said Mr. Knight courteously. "Dear me! It has been a warm evening."

Mr. Mavis, senior, had been the lawyer of all the gentry's families for miles round. He had had an office in Durham, but his home had been the square, comfortable white house at the end of Draycott village. It was always called "The Lawyer's House," it had been called so in his father's time, and now it belonged to his son. Mr. Mavis had been a sturdy, square little man, cheerful and comical — a man whose intimate acquaintance with an immense number of

skeletons had apparently never saddened him—a man who had never, by word or look, betrayed one of the many secrets which had been confided to him; who was honest, though he had feathered his nest pretty comfortably, and shrewd, though he liked his fellow-men. He had died suddenly, and young Quentin (who had been his father's partner) had had to step into his shoes with unexpected haste.

The elder Quentin Mavis had been much liked, therefore his father's clients stuck to Quentin the second, but they groaned over his ridiculous youth! His round face, and the black-lashed grey eyes, made him appear even younger than he was. His flaxen moustache was as fine and soft as a baby's hair. Only a few people noticed that the mouth under it shut as tight as a trap, and that the "boy" had already got a grip on the business, and was, besides, master at home. Mother, schoolboy brothers, and sisters of varying ages, all obeyed Quentin just as they had all obeyed Quentin's father.

"I was glad you stood by Miss Joy," said Quentin. "If it gets warmer still, too hot to hold her, where will she go?"

Mr. Knight was unduly irritated by the question. "Is that any business of yours?" he asked.

Quentin raised his eyebrows. The old fellow was not very polite, but perhaps the evening's events had taken it out of him. He certainly had championed the girl splendidly.

"No, I don't say that it is," he answered in his quiet, level voice, "but I am interested in the situation. Who wouldn't be? It was rather an exciting dinner party, was it not, sir? You were excited yourself. If it *were* my business, if I had any authority in the matter, if Miss Joy were one of my sisters, for instance, I wouldn't let her be another day under the same roof as that doctor."

"I am of your opinion," said Mr. Knight, becoming rather ashamed of his petulance. "This evening's events point to some rascality. Yet I am bound to own that Dr. MacIlvert did not impress me unfavourably at first sight."

"This evening's events?" said Quentin. "But I suppose you know that he has a pretty bad record? You must remember Lady Alice Lennox's trial?" He laughed a

little. "Of course you must! Why, even I remember it, though I was barely ten years old then. My father took me up to London to have something done to my teeth. We stayed in a friend's chambers, near the Law Courts. My father and I got into a bit of a scrimmage one day. Dr. MacIlvert was mobbed after he had left the witness-box, you know. We saw it! My father hoisted me on his shoulder, 'Now take a good look at a first-class rascal, my lad,' he said, and I looked with all my eyes. I've never forgotten it! There was an ugly rush. The chap was all but pulled down. He fought awfully pluckily against a crowd of filthy hands. His coat went in hanging shreds, and his hat got bashed in. When he stepped out of the courts he was a highly respectable person in broadcloth, and then in a twinkling he was a desperate being struggling for life. I hoped he'd win then. One man against a hundred wild beasts! You can't help hoping it, whatever he may have done. Then there was a tramp, tramp, tramp, and the police came, cleaving their way through the mob, and the doctor was surrounded and guarded, and my father set me on my feet. I asked my father what it all meant.

"'It means that old Judge Lynch has still a kick left in him in spite of the law and lawyers,' said he. I was such a little muff that I could not stand firm on my silly little legs when he put me down. I remember saying, 'Papa, I believe I am going to be sick,' and papa told me not to behave like a 'Molly.'"

Mr. Knight laughed. "I don't know that I would have given a child of ten a sight of Judge Lynch's methods," he said.

"Well, I dreamt of it," said Quentin. "Whenever I had nightmare I always saw dirty, cruel fingers clawing and scratching, and a coat splitting down the seam and showing first white, and then white dabbled with red and brown, and a bare, brawny arm, that bled where a brick had hit it. Oh, I never forgot that doctor! I got hold of a newspaper that evening and sat in a corner reading the police reports, till my father caught me at it, and stuffed the paper behind the

fire. When I was much older I looked up the account of that trial (which was quite a celebrated one), and I came to the conclusion that the mob got hold of the wrong end of the stick. The fellow's antecedents were shady, but he never was such a fool as to incite any one to murder. It was odd to come across him this evening. When we came into the room without that blessed brooch I knew he had got his back against the wall again, and was fighting for all he was worth. I hope he won't win this time."

"I wish that you would kindly enlighten my ignorance further," said Mr. Knight; "I seldom read the police reports."

"Oh, but you must surely have read all about Lady Alice Lennox and Dr. MacIlvert," said Quentin.

He supposed that the old fellow was mazed with looking backwards, but Mr. Knight bestowed an acute attention now on this modern scandal, and frowned over what he heard.

"I hold Miss Merridan very greatly to blame," he said, when Quentin had finished telling that version of the story which had been given to the public. "She was, of course, at liberty to be as foolish as she chose on her own account, but from the time she undertook the charge of a young girl she was bound to proceed with more circumspection. She is an extremely rash lady. Easily hoodwinked, biassed by flattery, and obstinately averse to taking advice. These are frequent feminine traits. I am not fond of interfering. Indeed, I do not recall having ever interfered before in any one's affairs, but for the sake of Miss Jeronime I shall seek an interview with her guardian at an early opportunity and shall venture on some quiet remonstrance."

Quentin smiled in the darkness. He wished he might witness the interview between Mr. Knight and the lady of "frequent feminine traits." They had reached the Yellow House by this time, and he bid Mr. Knight good-night, and went on his way.

He found a letter waiting him when he got home. It was from Mrs. de Grouchy, the wife of his late father's client.

"You are probably aware that my husband's health has been failing for some time past," Mrs. de Grouchy wrote.

"During the last two months it has become rapidly worse. He wishes to see you concerning some alteration in the drawing up of his will."

"The second will I've had to draw up this week," thought Quentin. But Miss Merridan's will had been a family joke as well as a source of income. She was constantly making it afresh, and Quentin hoped that the latest and silliest edition would yet prove not to be her last.

His thoughts returned to Jeronime Joy and the events of the evening. Jeronime had once, only once, been allowed to have tea and play games with his brothers and sisters. He had been nearly grown up then, and had despised little girls in pinafores. To-night the tables had been turned. The little girl had bloomed into more importance, and he had felt callow and awkward. He never felt callow at home, at least he had not since his father had died. He looked at himself in the glass when he got upstairs, which was a thing he seldom did, for although he had a good solid trust in himself, as a man must have who has a family to look after, he was not vain.

"I am quite as tall as she is anyhow," he said to himself, "and if the worst comes to the worst, and that rascally doctor gets Miss Merridan under his thumb, why should not my mother have Miss Joy to stay here for a bit?"

Then he sighed. Alas! the answer was obvious. The house was packed too full. As it was his sisters slept three in a room.

"And there is that rich old man with more rooms than he knows what to do with. What is the use of the Yellow House to him?" asked Quentin.

He did not guess that the rich old man was at that moment standing at the bottom of the grand staircase, and reflecting with deep satisfaction that the Yellow House would suit Jeronime very well, very well indeed.

"She will come down her own stairs when I am dead," said Mr. Knight. "It will all be hers then, and she may snap her fingers at adventurers and old maids. Yes, yes, she will come down her own staircase, and it just needs her to make it

perfect. She will come down in her white dress, and perhaps she'll have a bunch of spring flowers in her hand. She'll be older then, much older, for of course I shall not die for many, many years yet, and indeed it would not be at all well for Jeronime to be left with such a place as this while she is still so young. But some day it will be hers from cellar to garret, and it is a gift fit for a queen"—he chuckled, well pleased—"very fit for my little lady."

The next day Quentin went up to town, where he was to stay two or three nights with the De Grouchys. Mrs. de Grouchy received him kindly, but he felt that she was somewhat awe inspiring.

Twelve years had passed since the day when De Grouchy's horse had stumbled on the road to the Yellow House, and from the day of that unlucky fall he had never been his old self. He had been dying by inches for many weary months, but of late death had mercifully quickened the pace, and he was very near the end now—nearer than any one guessed. Time the giver had given to youth, flinging to De Grouchy's unacknowledged daughter beauty and womanliness. Time the robber had robbed from middle-age, and had taken the man's health and strength, and the remnants of his wife's youth, yet perhaps had given to her more than he took.

For slowly and surely the two who had seemed apart by the width of heaven and hell had drawn together. Life holds so many surprises, even for the cleverest guesser! And of all bridge-makers love is the most resourceful. De Grouchy would certainly not have guessed that a time would come when he would find it hard to miss his wife's company for a day, yet so it had happened, and there were moments when he was transiently aware that, so far as Emma was concerned, he had had better luck than he deserved. He had always known her to be good, but he was surprised to find her far from monotonous. She had got down from her pedestal in a really remarkable way, and though she was less quick-witted than he, the intensity of her pity taught her tact. To be tied to a sofa was a hard fate for any man. Emma never for one moment forgot its hardness. Her courage clasped hands

with his, and as the terms of his imprisonment grew more severe, he divined the tenderness that knew better than to express itself too openly lest it should chafe the sore pride of his hurt manhood, and he found it very comfortable. He was glad now that Emma was his wife.

Mrs. de Grouchy received Quentin with kindly gravity and took him into the library, where James de Grouchy lay on a couch, with a bear-skin flung over his paralysed limbs. He had shot the bear himself. He was a splendid wreck of a man.

"I wish that you were your father," he said irritably to Quentin, but then added with his quick, winning smile—

"Your father's son will forgive that wish, eh? Mavis and I were at school together."

"I wish that my father were here sir," said Quentin. "I am afraid I make a poor substitute."

"Oh, you're like him. You are very like him," said De Grouchy, "and you can't help being young. So we all throw your youth in your teeth, don't we? All we crusty old codgers do that!"

His quick, facile sympathy moved Quentin to a half-humorous, half-rueful response.

"Yes, I wish so many of my father's clients had not known me in long clothes. One doesn't seem able to get over that."

De Grouchy laughed merrily. He was not in the least like an "old codger." In spite of pain and illness he was a young-looking man for his years and strikingly handsome still.

"It's envy!" he said. "Tell them youth is the only fault that mends," then he sighed. "And make the most of it. Make the most of every hour of it."

"I will leave you two to discuss business," said Emma; but De Grouchy shied away from the subject like a restive horse.

"Here is my old friend's son come to see me to-day," he said. "To-morrow I'll meet my solicitor."

He had been in a fever of impatience till Quentin arrived; he had assured Emma that there was a thing that had to be done, and that he should probably be dead before the young man made his appearance to help him to do it, but now his

mood had changed. "Time enough, time enough!" he declared. "The boy amuses me. I've little to amuse me, the Lord knows! Since I've been on this ghastly sofa I've learnt to make the most of what I can get."

He harped on that theme, preached a sermon on it which Quentin never quite forgot. Whether he really took a fancy to the youth, or whether it pleased him to exert his old powers of the fascination, even at the last, it would be difficult to say. At any rate he treated Quentin as the son of a dear old friend, though as a matter of fact there had been no real friendship between himself and Quentin's father. And Quentin was attracted. He admired Mr. de Grouchy, and was, moreover, haunted by some illusive likeness. He found himself talking with unusual unreserve, speaking of his cares, which were heavy for such young shoulders, of his ambitions and aims. The contrast between the round, boyish face and the responsible attitude amused the dying man. De Grouchy had a faculty for seeing the real person. He recognised that Quentin had grit in him; he knew that he could be safely trusted.

"You'll get on," he said; "yes, I am sure of that—you'll get on. You are earning your own bread and cheese now, and you'll be paying for turtle and champagne (if you care for those things) before you are forty. Mind you keep digestion enough to enjoy them! That's where you hard-working fellows fail. You are all apt to be so confoundedly dyspeptic. Oh, I don't mean it literally," as Quentin laughingly protested. "You can be mentally and morally dyspeptic you know. You can starve your sense of enjoyment till it has no vigour left in it. Just remind yourself sometimes that there will be no use in having pushed for the best seat, if you can't enjoy the feast when you've got it!"

"I'll remember, sir," said Quentin. He was rather flattered by the interest shown in him, and every one likes a favourable prophecy.

"I suppose you long-headed chaps mean to pass on a share of the good things to the next generation," De Grouchy observed presently. He sighed. "Oh, you are the sort whose children inherit the earth! But you won't be thinking of marriage yet?"

"No," said Quentin soberly, "I've never been in love in my life. That sort of nonsense isn't in my line."

"Good Heavens!" said De Grouchy. He raised himself on his elbow and stared at the youth as if he were some strange natural phenomenon. Then he laughed with disconcerting merriment.

"How old are you? Twenty-three? You're in a very dangerous state, young man! 'Pon my word, I wonder what you're made of! Never been in love yet! Never been in love in your life, and you twenty-three!"

The sound of his laughter brought Emma de Grouchy back. Emma was always on the watch. She was trying to hold Death at bay yet a little longer. She stood on guard sleeplessly and unweariedly, but the conclusion was foregone, and De Grouchy knew it, and made light of her precautions.

Quentin dined *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. de Grouchy that evening. She had no faculty for small-talk, and the young man found her gentle politeness rather alarming. Emma's soft hair, that had been mouse-coloured, was quite grey now; her face was sweeter in expression, her thoughtful eyes less severe than in her youth; they had looked on things which had made them wet with pity.

Quentin went to a play after dinner. He felt his hostess was glad to be rid of him, his youthful senses revolted against a pervading sense of solemnity and strain. He came in about one o'clock and Mrs. de Grouchy met him in the hall. She looked tired, and it seemed to Quentin that she was all grey, like a ghost. She wore a loose grey silk wrapper, and her grey eyes shone out of her white face.

"My husband is very restless and excited. Nothing will satisfy him but that he should see you now," she said. "Would you mind coming to his room? It is a strange time to choose for a business talk, but he is ill, you know. You will forgive his whims."

"Of course. I'll come at once," said Quentin.

De Grouchy's bedroom had been arranged on the ground floor, in order to save carrying him up and down stairs. A nurse came out of the room, and Quentin saw that a priest

was waiting in the dining-room. He caught a glimpse of the black robe through the half-open door, and wondered if Mrs. De Grouchy was trying to make a death-bed convert. He felt ashamed of himself for having been to a farce; he realised that De Grouchy was very ill indeed; somehow he had not taken that in before, in spite of Mrs. De Grouchy's letter.

De Grouchy was sitting up in bed watching the door eagerly. He signed to Quentin to come close to him.

"I want you. I want you. There is no time to spare," he said, "I'm dying now. There's my will on that table by me. It is all right—but unsigned. I've a codicil to put in. Read it to me. Be quick about it."

Quentin sat down and read the will aloud. It was a very simple document. Everything was left unreservedly to Emma De Grouchy. Quentin read deliberately, for he was a deliberate person. Through the sound of his own voice he heard De Grouchy's quick, panting breathing and exclamations of impatience.

"That is all. What do you wish me to add?" he said, taking up a pen.

"I can't catch my thoughts. They gallop away—gallop away," said De Grouchy. "Where's my wife? Call her. She knows how to catch them. No—no—don't. I forgot. I don't want Emma to know about this business. One must draw the line somewhere. A man's wife, you know! One mayn't be a model. Hang it, man, I never said I *was* a model, but I have some decency, I hope! I don't mix Emma up with—there, it's funny too! I can't help laughing at it! It is so exactly my luck. Out of all the children in creation that old fool must needs go and choose my child."

"There is something which you wish added to this will," said Quentin. "What is it?"

"What the devil is it, eh?" said De Grouchy. "I'm sure *I* don't know," and he began to laugh.

"Don't laugh. *Think*," said Quentin. His round face had a responsible look on it. At that moment he was singularly like his father. "You sent for me in order that I might put

in a codicil. Whom do you intend to benefit? Who is there beside your wife whom you wish to remember?"

"My wife? Well, I've done the square thing by her," said De Grouchy, "and what do you suppose she will do? She'll spend it all on masses, my dear fellow! Masses for my soul! What do you think of that? It is all d——d nonsense, you say? Yes, so it is—but women are made so. Either they are full of nonsense, or else they are harder than flint. Anne was harder than flint. She let her own child go! Ah, I've caught it. It's about that child that I wanted to speak to you. What's her name? Jeronime. That's it, Jeronime. She's my daughter."

"Do you wish to leave something to Miss Jeronime Joy, who lives with Miss Merridan at Hollowdene?" said Quentin.

He was immensely interested, and perhaps his voice expressed as much, for De Grouchy seemed amused.

"What the dickens is it to you, old fellow?" he said. "But you were always a queer chap! Upon my word, Mavis, you seem to get younger instead of older! You wear uncommonly well. Who would have thought that we were at school together?"

"We were not sir," said Quentin; "I am your old friend's son. How much do you wish to leave to Miss Jeronime?"

"You're putting words into my mouth," said De Grouchy with sudden sharpness. "I never said I would leave her anything, did I?" He put his hand to his head, with an evident effort to keep his attention to the subject. "But one's flesh and blood *is* one's flesh and blood. It counts at the end. One may as well square accounts a bit if one can. Yet I won't have Emma bothered. Emma is the sort one holds on to when the bad time comes. Look here, Mavis, if I leave something nominally to you, will you see that that girl gets its worth? Will you hand the value over to her? Come, it isn't much to ask."

Quentin flushed. He did not like the job.

"Oh, I forgot. It is not old Mavis. It's old Mavis' son. Tha is another pair of shoes. I forgot——" said De Grouchy

"It's all right, sir. I'll do it," said Quentin.

"Then put in a codicil to say that I leave you the Capo di Monte jars (there are four of them with raised figures and lids), say I leave them to Quentin Mavis in token of my—my long confidence and friendship with his father. Hurry up, man."

Quentin did as he was bid, though with rather a wry face.

"You wish me to sell the jars and hand over the money to Miss Jeronime. Then I should much prefer to state that they are left to me in trust. How do you know that I shall act honestly by her?"

"Oh, I'm not *that* kind of a fool," said De Grouchy. He leant back on his pillows with a satisfied air. "Call in Father Blair and the nurse to witness my signature and then go. I've done my best."

"Will the bit of china bring in anything worth having? Could you not make a more substantial provision for your daughter?" asked Mavis.

He knew that he had no right to make the suggestion. It was injudicious and presumptuous. His father would not have done it!

"What's that to you?" said De Grouchy. "She's pretty, eh? Never been in love in your life, though, and you twenty-three!"

Quentin rose hastily and went to the door and called in the doctor and the nurse. De Grouchy signed his name feebly, the witnesses signed theirs.

"Now go—*go!*" cried the sick man, with a gust of impatience. "I want no one but Emma now. Let Emma come to me."

Quentin left him without another word. He never saw De Grouchy again. Two impressions remained with him when he thought over that strange midnight interview by daylight. De Grouchy had managed, even on his death-bed, to shift the burden of his responsibilities on to other shoulders, and Emma de Grouchy was the kind whom one holds on to when the bad time comes.

"That is the right kind to have for a wife," thought Quentin. He had never thought so seriously about matrimony before.

CHAPTER XIII

JERONIME slept soundly till the birds woke her in the morning, but she was the only one of the trio most concerned in the evening's events who closed her eyes in undisturbed rest that night.

Dr. MacIlvert sat up smoking till a very late hour. He laid the plan of his further campaign and he had enough to think about, yet on the whole he was very hopeful.

Miss Merridan sent word that she was not well enough to appear at breakfast, and Jeronime took her place at the head of the table, looking as fresh as a flower, but very solemn. Jeronime never attempted to play a part. She would not pretend that nothing was wrong. She answered in monosyllables when the Polish musician tried to talk to her, and when Miss Melissa Tylor suggested that "since dear Miss Merridan wasn't feeling very bright, they had better be going before lunch," she replied without circumlocution.

"Yes, thank you. I think you had much better *all* go away, if you don't mind. Godmother says that her headache is most dreadfully bad."

The "all" evidently included Dr. MacIlvert, who was sitting at the bottom of the table and who was somewhat amused at this naïve and simple attempt to dismiss him.

"I am going to London to-day, Miss Joy," said he, and Jeronime congratulated herself.

He did not go with the others, however, and when the carriage had rolled away with the actress and the Polish musician and the Japanese, and Jeronime was left alone with him, a sensation of loneliness and something that was almost

fear came over her. She was relieved to see Mr. Knight in the distance approaching the house.

"There is Mr. Knight. I must go to meet him," said she, and ran quickly down the gravel drive. The doctor smiled and went indoors. There was no time to be lost and everything to be gained by promptness.

He re-read a letter which he had written to Miss Merridan before breakfast.

"MY DEAREST LADY,—I am leaving you by this morning's train. After the strange scene of last night I take for granted that you will agree with me that it is best that I should go. I will not pretend that this parting is of no moment or that I can ever return as if nothing had happened. So long as I live you will possess my warmest devotion and my deepest gratitude, but you will not hear from me again nor be troubled any more by me. I purposely refrain from giving you any address, for I am going out of your life for ever, as well as out of this home where I have spent my happiest hours. There are things for which thanks are inadequate.

"Yours always,

"WALLACE MACILVERT."

He approved the letter; there was nothing that could be advantageously added to it. He rang a bell. "Take this to Miss Merridan," he said to the footman, who eyed him inquisitively, for some gossip had penetrated below stairs, "and say that I am on the point of leaving."

"But the carriage has gone, sir," said the man.

"I have ordered a trap from the inn," said the doctor. "My portmanteau is packed. You can carry it down. Ah! —I've left my cigar-case upstairs! No, never mind. I'll find it myself. Take the note."

He went to his room and stood for three minutes looking out at the fair, smiling country with eyes that for once saw without apprehending. Then he went very slowly out of the room and down the stairs. He stood in the hall again. It was an anxious moment, one of the sort that tells on a man

and shortens the span of his days. The hand which held the match with which he paused to light his cigar shook and he was a long time over the operation.

Miss Merridan's maid came flying down the stairs; never had the rustle of petticoats been so welcome a sound to him!

"Sir—sir! Oh, I am just in time!" she cried breathlessly. "Miss Merridan sent me to say she must see you before you go. Indeed, sir, even if you was to miss your train you must go to her."

The doctor threw away his cigar and looked at his watch.

"Well, well, I haven't too much time. I *shall* miss my train, I'm afraid," he said, "but if she insists——"

He mounted the stairs again. The soft carpet under his feet gave him exquisite pleasure. It had been on the cards that he might never tread it again. But now he knew that he held the game in his hand. Miss Merridan was in her boudoir, hastily attired in a clinging rose-coloured tea-gown. Her face bore marks of the night's vigil, and of something besides—of the sharp fear that had turned her sick when she read the man's note.

"I—I thought that I was too late," she cried.

Dr. MacIlvert shut the door behind him and took both her hands in his.

"Lucilla, I will make no false pretences. The time for them has gone by. Either I must have everything or nothing," said he. "You must let me go for ever or you must give me —yourself."

He knew that she would yield. He was morally pointing a pistol at poor Lucilla. She could not bid him go for ever. She tried feebly to draw her hands away.

"But I must think," she said.

There was the sound of a knock, and the doctor swore.

"Mr. Knight sent me to tell you that he would be greatly obliged if you could see him for ten minutes, ma'am."

It was the same footman who had been told to carry down the doctor's portmanteau, and he was grinning broadly.

"Ask Mr. Knight to wait. Miss Merridan is engaged at this moment," said the doctor coolly.

Then he turned to her again.

"But *I* can't wait," said he. "Lucilla, I meant to go without another word. I was on the point of going. That would have been the right thing to do, but *you* called me back. How should I refuse to come when you called? Why did you send for me just now?"

"Because I could not bear to let you go—for always," said Miss Merridan.

Her many little affectations had momentarily dropped from her, and she spoke as simply as a girl might have spoken.

"But you must bear it, and so must I," he said, "unless you are brave enough to face the sneer of all your world, my dear, and to be my wife. It's a great deal to ask. I've thought it too much! That is why I was going. I am a poor man, and a man of whom people have said vile things. But you called me back, and now you must choose. I can't shilly-shally. I am not the kind who can play tame cat about a house. Will you be my dear wife, my dearest lady? Will you believe in me in spite of evil tongues, and love me, and hold to me? If you will, though we are not boy and girl, I swear to God I'll love you better than any woman was loved yet. I swear you shall be happier than ever you have been in all your life, for you never have been happy, you know! You don't so much as understand what happiness is. I'll teach you that, my dear. But if you are afraid, then say so, and I'll go. There are no three ways out of the place you and I have come to now. Either it is goodbye, and a lasting goodbye, or else you are mine."

It was a vigorous wooing, and the man was playing hard for the things he liked best. That fact gave it a certain rough sincerity. He might not be in love with Lucilla Merridan, but he was in deadly earnest for all that, for he loved what she represented!—ease and comfort and warmth and luxury! Lucilla stood for all these to him, and on the other side of her hall door lurked cold and hunger and despair. If he did not make good his footing here, he must again take arms against a world which had turned on him, and the odds were heavy. The odds are terribly heavy for a man who is no longer young

and who has lost his character, and who has been trained to one kind of work only. When he thought on these things his heart quailed, though cowardice was not usually counted among his vices.

"Speak! I can't stand the suspense," he said roughly.

He dropped her hands and turned as if to leave the room. Then, for the second time, she called him back.

"No, no, don't go! Stay!" she said.

There was another tap at the door.

"Mr. Knight says that he has come on a matter of urgent business, ma'am."

The doctor laughed hilariously, "See him! See him, my dear lady," he said. "Was his business by chance the same as mine? If so he's too late! Just three minutes too late."

His jubilance was too pronounced, but it was very genuine. Miss Merridan knew that she ought to be offended at his suggestion, which more than bordered on the impertinent, and her taste was frequently jarred by the doctor! Yet his vigour overbore and swept her along.

"You must come with me," she said. She looked wistfully at him. "They will all—all—say that I am a mad old fool. Will you really be good to me?"

Dr. MacIlvert put his arm round her. "On my honour I will, Lucilla," he declared. And although he was a cheat and a liar, and although his honour was of a most questionable and tarnished quality, he really meant to be.

Mr. Knight stood in the big drawing-room. He held Jeronime's workbox in his hands, but he had sent Jeronime away.

"I prefer to speak on this matter in your absence, my dear," he had said.

He was not a belligerent person. His forefathers had been peaceable tradesmen, yet Dr. MacIlvert, who was a shrewd judge of both men and women, was absolutely thankful that he had managed to clinch matters before encountering this grey-haired gentleman.

"He has plenty of grit, but thank Heaven he moves slowly," thought the doctor, though perhaps heaven had not taken much part in his side of the game!

Mr. Knight would not shake hands with the doctor, he looked gravely past him. "I should be glad to see you alone," he said to his hostess.

"I have no secrets from Dr. MacIlvert," said she.

Mr. Knight received this rather surprising information with unmoved countenance. She was even sillier than he had expected.

"And I have no secret to discuss. At the same time I should be glad to speak with you alone," he reiterated.

The doctor did not budge. He was in a position which would have been untenable to most men, but his skin was thick, and he could not afford to indulge in fine feelings when so much was at stake.

"I see no necessity for that," said Miss Merridan. She told herself that she would not be bullied, but in truth she was afraid of Mr. Knight. She fancied that he represented the first instalment of the world's verdict on her behaviour. She was not ordinarily too subservient to the world's opinion, but she had never before contemplated anything so outrageous as marriage with the doctor. It had not occurred to her that Mr. Knight was thinking very little about her, and a great deal about Jeronime.

Mr. Knight bowed gravely.

"Very well. That must be as you choose," he glanced at the little workbox he held. "How do you suppose that your brooch came to be found in Miss Jeronime's box?"

Miss Merridan put her hand to her head. All that affair of the brooch seemed to have floated into the background of her consciousness.

"The whole painful matter is beyond my comprehension. I do not feel equal to discussing it," she said.

"It is certainly painful and awkward," said Mr. Knight "because diamond brooches do not walk about by themselves, nor escape through locked drawers unaided! I need hardly say that I am convinced that Miss Jeronime is as blameless as—as that child."

He pointed to a picture of a Madonna and Child that was let into the white wood over the mantelpiece.

"I have no wish to shake your confidence in her," said Miss Merridan. "We will leave the subject there if you please. The dear child would have been welcome to any ornament of mine that she chose to fancy. I have never grudged her anything. I do not wish ever to hear another word about this wretched affair."

"You are very generous, my dear lady," said Dr. MacIlvert.

Mr. Knight's usually quiet, grey eyes brightened with sudden anger. He did not lose command of his temper easily, but he stared into the fire for half a minute before he could trust himself to speak again. Then he ignored the doctor.

"We all know that Miss Jeronime's fancies lies in the direction of luxuries for her flowers. I have known her collect soot to dig into the soil for her roses, but my imagination is not vivid enough to picture her 'fancying your diamonds,'" he said.

"Of course, of course, Jeronime never cared a farthing for such ornaments. Why do you persist in talking about this—this misery?" cried Miss Merridan. "Do you not believe that *I* know, at least as well as you do, what Jeronime's tastes are? Do you take me for her enemy?"

"It certainly appears to me to be scarcely possible that any one who has the honour of knowing her could imagine that Jeronime could be tempted to steal a bit of finery," said Jeronime's champion, and the contempt in his voice cut, though he was trying to speak calmly. "But both last night and to-day you have spoken as if there were some doubt in your mind. You say you have no wish to shake my confidence. You need have no scruple on that point, because nothing that any one has suggested to you would be in the least likely to do that. You ask why I persist in pursuing a distasteful subject. It is because a wicked attempt has been made to cast suspicion upon Jeronime. It stands to reason that either she took that brooch from the drawer of your escritoire and hid it (she being in possession of your keys) or else that that brooch never was in the drawer at all. If you can suppose that Miss Jeronime played so bad a part, I, who am her friend, should like to see the matter sifted."

"It is not your business," said Miss Merridan. "It is no one's business but mine, and I do not accuse the poor dear child! I have borne a great deal from her. I have always been devoted to her, and I do not think she stole. I am sure that she is as innocent of vulgar dishonesty as I am myself, but she has very strong, unreasonable antipathies. They might lead her into——" She checked herself, for the doctor raised his eyebrows and laid a warning hand on her. "I say no more."

"It is almost enough," said Mr. Knight. "You do not think Miss Jeronime a common thief, but you imply that she might be led into a dishonest act if prompted by a strong, unreasonable antipathy. I entirely disagree with you, though I would observe that the majority of honourable people have a natural antipathy to rogues and swindlers and liars and thieves."

He had not once looked at Dr. MacIlvert, but that gentleman asserted himself now.

"That is language which should not be used to Miss Merridan," he said.

"It might be as well," said Mr. Knight, still ignoring the doctor—"it might be as well to make quite sure that Miss Jeronime's antipathies *are* unreasonable before you blame her for them, and suggest them as the probable motive of an act that would give the lie to all that we have known and believed about her."

"You browbeat me in my own house," cried Miss Merridan, "and you insult my guest and the man who will be my husband." She turned from him angrily and put her hand in Dr. MacIlvert's. "I will hear nothing against him!"

"I submit," said Mr. Knight, who it is to be feared was far too angry with Miss Merridan to care whether she came to grief or no. "I will not offend you again by offering you advice, madam, but I must ask (being Miss Jeronime's old friend) what, if you please, is to become of her? You must see that under the circumstances it is out of the question that she should remain here."

"On the contrary," said Dr. MacIlvert, "my dear lady's adopted child will be doubly welcome under *our* roof."

The consummate impertinence of the speech was meant to draw Mr. Knight's attention to himself, for the doctor preferred to take a leading part in a fray, but it failed in its object. Mr. Knight set his lips grimly, and would not condescend to pay any heed to the remark.

"Jeronime will remain with me. There is no reason why she should not," said Miss Merridan, though rather faintly.

At that moment Jeronime came in by the open window. Her serious eyes turned from one to the other of the combatants—from her old friend, who was stiff and white with the slow anger of age, to her godmother, flushed and tremulous, and to the doctor, who was aggressively cheerful.

"I heard godmother say my name. If you are talking about me, will you please tell me what you are saying? I am not a little girl now. I think it would be fairer to tell me," said she.

"Certainly," said Mr. Knight. "Miss Merridan has done me the honour to inform me that she intends to marry Dr. MacIlvert, and I have just expressed my opinion that in that case this house will be no fit home for you. If you would like to come to mine now, my dear, you are very heartily welcome."

"Oh!" said Jeronime.

Her breath was momentarily taken away, but after a pause for consideration she said, "I thought perhaps that was what you might do, godmother, but there is not a very great hurry, is there? You won't be marrying Dr. MacIlvert to-day or to-morrow, will you? I don't want to be in a hurry, please Mr. Knight. Mrs. Lovesaye would be dreadfully put out if I rushed over to stay at the Yellow House *now*. She would not have had time to put out the best bedroom covers, or the towels, or the sheets, or the soap, or anything."

It was an anti-climax. Miss Merridan laughed hysterically. "Dear child! She thinks only of the covers and the soap and the clean towels and the sheets."

Mr. Knight took a curt leave and went, without shaking hands with any one. Dr. MacIlvert was as little pleased as Jeronime's friend. He was not quite sure about this girl.

Her very simplicity was baffling to him. *Did* she think only of the towels and the clean sheets? There was the question. It was a question which Jeronime herself could hardly have answered, for she was not in the least introspective yet, though she was ripening fast.

Mr. Knight had got half-way across his own park when he heard footsteps running after him, and turning, waited for Jeronime to come up with him.

"Well, Miss Jerry, so you won't come to us," said he. "Us" meant the Yellow House and himself.

"No, not now, please," said Jeronime.

She was panting from her run. She sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree on the rise of ground that lay above the lake, and coaxed him to sit by her.

"I ran after you because I thought you looked rather vexed," said she frankly.

"To tell you the truth, my dear, I am more than 'rather vexed' over these extraordinary proceedings," said Mr. Knight gravely. "I do not at all approve of your remaining in a house where an unmitigated scoundrel rules the roast. It is not right of you to stay there."

"I do not want to do wrong," said Jeronime, regarding him with wide-opened, puzzled eyes. "But godmother is not married to Dr. MacIlvert yet. Perhaps she never will be. Perhaps she will find out for herself how horrid he is. There is never much use in what other people find out for one, is there? One must know things for one's self, just as one must eat for one's self and drink for one's self."

"No doubt there are some silly young folk who must break their heads against stone walls before they'll believe stone is hard, or their necks at the bottom of precipices before they will own precipices are dangerous," said Mr. Knight grimly. "They pay for their conceit. I hope that you are not one of them, Miss Jerry."

"I hope not," Jeronime agreed soberly. Mr. Knight was decidedly cross, and she was sorry for that. He had never been cross to her before.

She sat silently poking bits of grass into the button-holes

of her clumping country boots. Her face was flushed and downcast. But at last she lifted it, with a very earnest look in her eyes. "I don't think it is conceit," she said.

Mr. Knight, whose thoughts had travelled away from his last words, was ashamed when he was reminded of them. "No, no! I was possibly a little testy, my dear. Anxiety about you rasped my temper."

"And I don't think it is only because of the towels and the clean sheets, and Mrs. Lovesaye not liking things to be settled all in a moment, though that was a true reason to," said Jeronime. "There's something else besides. It is very difficult to root one's real reasons up out of the deep places of one's mind, and show them to any one—even to you. They've got tough roots, like dandelions."

Mr. Knight saw that she was blushing with the exertion, and he waited patiently, but with some curiosity.

"I should think it was luckiest to live with people one really belongs to," said Jeronime. "It isn't always quite comfortable to be an adopted child, but godmother has done everything for me, hasn't she? If I went away in a hurry now just because she has taken up with Dr. MacIlvert, I should be like a tramp who comes and sleeps in her barn, and eats breakfast the next morning, and then goes off, without doing the bit of weeding he ought to have done. I don't want to be more like a tramp than I need be. Since I've begun to grow up, I have felt rather—well, rather too like a beggar, you know, anyhow."

Mr. Knight was considerably taken aback, touched, and indignant.

"Jerry!" he cried, "if you had been my child you should never have felt like a beggar! If you will be my child for the future, I will, please God, teach you that what you give me, leaves me your debtor, not your creditor."

"Thank you very much," said Jeronime. "But I don't want to be adopted any more. It really doesn't do. That's just one of the things that one finds out for one's self, you see. That's the other reason against going to live with you at the Yellow House. First of all, I mustn't go off in a hurry like

an ungrateful tramp; but secondly, when I *do* go—and if godmother really is married to Dr. MacIlvert, why, then I shall have to go—when I do go I must try to earn my own food, and not live on other people. Mère Marthe was a very honest, hard-working woman. I remember Mère Marthe. I should think I might be a very hard-working, honest woman, too, don't you?"

The mixture of pride and childishness, the assumption of womanliness in this speech, made Mr. Knight smile with very mixed feelings. The first part of it had hurt him, though Jeronime had not meant to hurt him, the *finale* amused him.

"My dear little lady! So you will be a very honest, hard-working woman, will you?"

"Don't laugh at me, please, because I am serious," said Jeronime.

"Then, indeed," said Mr. Knight, "I am sure you can be an honest woman—the most honest woman I ever met, but as to the work? It is not so easy for a girl to earn her bread, my dear, and you have been accustomed to plenty of butter as well. You had better, by far, come to *us*."

Jeronime stood up and looked through the fresh June foliage across the lake at the Yellow House."

"But I am strong and young, you know. Strong, young people should not be living on other people. Mère Marthe said something about that once. I can't remember exactly. I can't recollect the words she used. She talked a funny French, you know, not like the French one learns from French masters. But she said something that meant that when her old bones could do no more work outside the ground, it would be time for them to be put under it, to help feed the grass for the little goats to eat. Mr. Knight, don't you think that I really must belong to quite poor people like Mère Marthe?"

"No, I don't," said Mr. Knight. "I think you belong to such people as owned the Yellow House."

The tenacious way in which she treasured such sayings of Mère Marthe's as she could disentangle from the misty past, showed an obstinate faithfulness that might sweeten and

ripen into the best of qualities, or might lose its sweetness in simple obstinacy.

"I don't want to belong to them," said Jeronime. Then a softer expression crept in her young face.

"You don't mind, do you, Mr. Knight?"

"Mind what, my dear?"

"All that I have been saying. All about not wanting to be adopted any more, and trying not to behave like a tramp, and all that? I am afraid that I have talked too much, and bothered you. You are so grave. I tried to explain, because, you see, you are my greatest friend, and I wanted you to understand, and—I love you very much, Mr. Knight."

She held up her face to him to kiss. Of late Jeronime had left off kissing, but she felt that this was an especial occasion. Mr. Knight, however, did not kiss her.

"Thank you, Miss Jerry," he said, "I understand very well. You had better be running back now, my dear. Good-bye."

Jeronime went home thoughtfully. When she re-entered the drawing-room she found Miss Merridan sitting alone, with idle hands and dreamy eyes, engrossed in a reverie, from which she woke with a start.

"Well, Jeronime. Have you and Mr. Knight overcome the difficulty about the clean towels?" she asked coldly.

"No, godmother," said Jeronime. She was apt to be painfully monosyllabic in her intercourse with Miss Merridan. To-day she made an effort to overcome the failing. "I don't see why I should rush away from you like that, godmother, unless you wish me to go away directly. *Do* you wish it?"

Miss Merridan was surprised. If she had not wished, she had certainly expected that Jeronime would have left her.

"You need not ask such a question," she said. "In spite of much ingratitude from you. I have always, always been tenderly devoted to you, my child. It would be quite unlike me to wish you to leave me! I am never fickle. I consider that Mr. Knight behaved in a most outrageous manner in suggesting that my roof was not a fitting shelter for you. He

was preposterously rude to me. Had you any affection for me you would have resented his impertinence."

Jeronime stooped down to pull some burrs off the hem of her skirt. Her face was very red when she lifted it again; she hoped Miss Merridan would attribute the redness to stooping.

"He didn't like any one to think I was bad," she said. "It *would* have been bad to have taken your brooch and hidden it away because I detest Dr. MacIlvert. It would have been as wicked as to have taken it for the sake of the sham diamonds." She paused a moment, then added with an effort, "I can understand that he did not like that idea, and that it made him very angry, because—I don't like it myself. I *never* have done such wicked things as that, have I, godmother?"

For once Miss Merridan could find no words in which to reply. In her heart she was convinced by Jeronime. No one who had any unspoilt instinct left could have believed that the girl lied or played a part.

"Joy," she cried, and there was real pain in her voice, and an appeal too, to a nature that was fundamentally stronger and simpler than her own. "Joy! I do not disbelieve you, but I *cannot* distrust him! You are a child. You do not understand, of course, but I cannot bear to distrust him now. The time is past for that. I have gone too far."

Poor Jeronime, standing confused on the threshold of life, stared dumbly at her, and yet was touched for the first time by Miss Merridan's complicated emotions. She had always been bothered by them before, but the reality of this mad infatuation was undoubted and poignant.

"Never mind, godmother," she said at last. "Never mind! If you believe in me, that's all right, you know, and if you believe in Dr. MacIlvert as well, since you want to, why——" she hesitated, she had meant to say, "then *that's* all right too," but the words stuck in her throat.

A great many people believe in a number of things because "they want to," but Jeronime's mind was intrinsically truthful, and recoiled from bribery.

"If? Oh, I do, I do with all my heart," said the poor lady, and indeed so far as that was concerned, there was no doubt that it was entirely on the doctor's side.

Presently she added, "He has gone away for the present. We thought it better that he should not stay with me now, until we are married."

"When will that be?" said Jeronime, rather shyly.

"At our time of life there is little use in wasting the precious weeks. Enough time has been wasted already," said Miss Merridan.

Jeronime knew that she was quoting the doctor's very words. The phrase was his. She could hear him saying in his cheerful, decided voice, "Enough time has been wasted already, my dear lady."

"We shall be married in London in August. Every one will have left town then, and I prefer a quiet wedding. On Monday I am going up to my flat. Since you have not deserted me, I will take you with me, Joy. I have to buy a few clothes. One cannot do without a few clothes, even at my age. I will buy a new dress for you too, dear one."

"I—I would rather have the money, if you don't mind," Jeronime blurted out awkwardly.

It had vexed Miss Merridan of late that the child showed an inclination to hoard money, but to-night she was too preoccupied to find fault. She and Jeronime spent a wonderfully peaceful evening together, after all the storms of the week.

Jeronime sang to her after dinner, and Miss Merridan leant back among down cushions (she was worn out by excitement) and heard the young, fresh voice as an accompaniment to her thoughts. She was glad that she had accepted Dr. MacIlvert, she could not have done otherwise, but now that he was not actually present she was uneasy. The doubt and the gladness were like the ebb and flow of a tide. She had played with the tide, just dabbling her feet in it at first; now it was carrying her right away—where? She did not really know where.

Jeronime sang on. She had some sweet, rich, low notes,

though the middle octave of her voice was weak. Her song reminded one of the natural song of a bullfinch, but certainly not of a cultivated, piping bullfinch. Miss Merridan had never greatly encouraged her to sing, for she could not bear to hear any one practise scales and exercises; also she knew that Mademoiselle du Clos had been a professional singer, and she did not wish the girl to resemble her mother in any respect. To-night the singing was soothing. Miss Merridan roused herself once to say, "Very sweet, dear Joy! You really are developing quite a pretty little voice, though you do not know how to use it."

Jeronime paused with her hands on the keys. "Is it really pretty, godmother? Perhaps I might earn some money by singing," she said hopefully.

CHAPTER XIV

MISS MERRIDAN was glad to go up to London. Those quiet days for reflection, which had followed the doctor's departure, had been almost unbearable! She did not want to reflect. Of what use was reflection now?

In London she met him again, and though he was no longer living under her roof, he was pretty constantly with her. He was an assiduous lover. He meant to run no risks. He believed that it was always on the cards that his Lucilla might repent of her rashness, and leave him in the lurch. Among the many great advantages of having a rich *fiancée* there was one disadvantage. Your rich woman is never hampered or clogged by those mercenary reasons which make the carrying out of our whims so difficult to most of us. The doctor was determined not to let his influence wane, and his devotion was unstinted. He really rather enjoyed the *rôle*. Lucilla often amused him vastly. He believed that he understood her so well that he could play on her like an instrument, and within limits his belief was justified. He consciously flattered her vanity, but in an indirect and unconscious way his power over her flattered his.

Jeronime was left very much alone, and while she always hated London, she hated it more than usual under present circumstances. It seemed to her shocked and puzzled eyes that Miss Merridan was bewitched. It irritated her to hear Dr. MacIlvert's opinions reproduced at second-hand; she always recognised them for his.

"Godmother never thought that for herself. How dreadful it is that she should let some one else get right *inside* her, so

that she can't even think her own thoughts, but brings out his instead," Jeronime would reflect with a shudder.

It certainly was a pity that the girl should first see love in this strange, mad guise. Time hung heavily enough on her hands. She was bereft of her garden, and she was no book-worm. Though she was never timid in the country, she feared a crowd, and greatly disliked walking alone in London streets. She began to cast long thoughts backwards, trying hard to remember more of the dimly descried years of early childhood, and to throw long thoughts forwards, trying equally vainly to forecast the future.

One fine June morning Miss Merridan announced her intention of spending the day alone, or with Jeronime for her sole companion.

"It is my dear father's birthday. I always consecrate this day to his and to my mother's memory," she said. "I am going to Kensal Green Cemetery, where they are buried. I shall start immediately after lunch."

"Well, if you *must* go to sit in a churchyard, let me come too," said the doctor, who had appeared at the flat almost before Miss Merridan had finished her breakfast. "Don't mope by yourself among graves, my dearest lady! For my part I hate the very sight of them. They mark defeats, eh? But still if you must——"

"No, Wallace, I don't want you to come with me. I will give this day to memory," she said.

It was seldom, indeed, that she refused his company, but perhaps she felt her lover would be too incongruous by her good old parents' grave! They would so strongly have mis-doubted and disapproved of him. Besides, though he could be passionate, the doctor could never be sentimental. So to Jeronime's satisfaction they were rid of him for once, and started unescorted.

They drove to the gates of Kensal Green and there sent the carriage away, and walked to the spot where lay the bones of the old couple who had so idolised their only child. Were they quite undisturbed by the storm of feeling that had shaken her? Did they look on life with wiser eyes from that other

point of view? Did they know or care that Lucilla tried to give this one day to them?

Jeronime had fetched a spade and a watering-pot from the gardener's cottage; she worked away round the graves with vigour and enjoyment, while Miss Merridan sat on a tombstone and watched her. At one time the Merridans' grave had always been covered with hothouse flowers, but of late it had been rather neglected.

"The inscription on the stone is getting blurred," said Jeronime.

"*To my darling mother from her ever inconsolable daughter.* 'Inconsolable' has got filled up with lichen, godmother. I can hardly make it out."

"Joy," said Miss Merridan suddenly, "everything gets blurred with time. The sharpest sensations lose their edge. No one is inconsolable. Nothing lasts, and we all end in our coffins. That is why we must make the most of life, and not refuse what poor chances of happiness come our way."

"Dr. MacIlvert said that, I'm sure," said Jeronime.

She knelt upright on the grass and put down her gardening tools.

"Godmother," she said earnestly, "I think that sounds like a greedy way of taking life, but he *would* swallow anything he could get, wouldn't he? Do, do give him up. I am quite sure he is a pig!"

"Hush! You must not say such things to me. I shall soon be his wife," said Miss Merridan.

She spoke gently in spite of some provocation. Jeronime had a strange feeling that the "godmother" she had known was actually dead, or changed beyond recognition.

"You cannot in the least understand, but I will not be angry with you, dear little Joy. We have not had much time together of late, have we? Next month the doctor and I are going to Italy, but when we come home from our wedding trip——"

"I couldn't go on living with you and him then, godmother!" said Jeronime. "Why, you know I couldn't."

Miss Merridan protested, but protested half-heartedly, for perhaps in her heart she did know it.

"I should never, never turn away from my adopted child, and where could you find such another home, you foolish girl? If I were to consent to your leaving me, where would you go?"

"I know what I should like to do. I should like to find Mère Marthe," said Jeronime. "I've saved up all the money I could save so that some day I might do that. Godmother, won't you, if you please, tell me now, who is Mère Marthe? and who is my mother and who is my father? How did it happen that you brought me up and took charge of me? I ought to know. It isn't fair not to tell me."

"I was very sad and out of health and lonely," said Miss Merridan. "I missed my dear parents terribly. Friends are all very well in their way, but of course they all have their own interests and family ties. I wanted something of my very own, Joy. Then one day Dr. MacIlvert brought me an advertisement. I remember so well that he came into the room with it in his hand and waved it before my eyes and cried, 'Well now, here's the prescription for you, Miss Merridan;' that was before he left England under a cloud. He was nothing to me then but a trusted medical adviser. The advertisement had been cut out of a magazine, and it had been put in by a woman who was anxious to give away her little girl to any rich person who would take the child. Dr. MacIlvert made all necessary inquiries for me. He went to St. Malo, where you were living with an old French peasant woman, and he satisfied himself that you were a healthy, pretty little thing. Your mother was a French lady, a professor of music. I do not know who your father was, for she absolutely refused to give up his name. She said that he was a gentleman. Your mother's name was Du Clos. She was Mademoiselle Du Clos. That is literally all that I know, and it was all that I wished to know."

"Mademoiselle Du Clos," said Jeronime slowly. "Then she was not married, was she?" She reflected for a few seconds. "Of course I know that people who are not married ought

not to have babies. I must have been started wrong! What a great pity! I daresay that is why I have never done very well, although you have spent such a lot of money on me. I don't think my mother should have given me away, anyhow!"

She spoke with unaffected sadness and simplicity, but Miss Merridan felt rebuked.

"Your mother was poor. I offered you every advantage, but it may be that she and I were both wrong," she said.

Till now she had always despised that hard, business-like French girl who had got rid of the child with so much *aplomb* and decision! To-day she had qualms about her own share in the bargain. Dr. MacIlvert, in turning her world upside down, had altered Lucilla Merridan's point of view, and had strangely shaken her belief in herself.

"Oh, if Maman was poor, then I belong to poor people," said Jeronime. "That is why I like digging so much! Could I go to St. Malo while you are on your wedding-trip? I feel as if I must find Mère Marthe again. Perhaps she could help us to find out what I had better do next. Godmother, you are very good and kind, but you don't really want me now, do you? It makes you uncomfortable to have me sitting by and thinking how horrid Dr. MacIlvert is, and yet I don't truly know how I am to help it."

Miss Merridan covered her face with her hands. She was torn by conflicting feelings, and Jeronime was painfully and youthfully outspoken. The child was slipping from her—the child whom she had sworn should be the first object of her life, but who certainly was very far from being the first object of her life now.

"See, there is a funeral procession coming towards us,' she said, evading the direct answer. "They are carrying the coffin to that grave that is newly dug behind us. Pick up your spade and watering-pot, Joy. We must move away."

She rose hastily and walked farther off, but Jeronime lingered, watching the slow, sad little company winding towards her, and presently, as if still fascinated, she stood just on the outskirts of the group of mourners. The words of the burial

service reached her through the still, June air. She had read, but never heard them before.

"Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down like a flower. He fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay."

The instability of things temporal had been brought home to Jeronime of late, but as she stood there with solemn face, under the young leaves in the summer sunshine, her young spirits that were in touch with the joy of the quickening life round her revolted against the saying that "Man hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery." It seemed to her that she had lived quite a long time already, and that the years had been full of many sensations that were not in the least miserable. The very sound of dancing gnats, the very smell of upturned earth, and the brave and delicate beauty of the June flowers surely gave the preacher the lie.

Yet she was sorry too. She was sorry for the man whose body would soon be shut away from the glory of the day, sorrier still for the woman with the white, set face who stood unweeping by the open grave. Jeronime unwittingly watched her father's funeral, and wondered idly whether it were an old or a young man who lay in the coffin, and whether he were really glad "to be delivered out of the miseries of this sinful world." She was at once fascinated and repelled by the mystery of death, and she remained motionless till the service was over. Then she walked very slowly away and joined Miss Merridan, who was inclined to be shocked at her proceedings.

"You should not be vulgarly inquisitive, dear one," she said.

"It is so strange that people should die. I don't feel as if I could really take it in," said Jeronime.

She finished tidying the border round the Merridan grave after that, and then the gardener, who had received many a handsome tip from Miss Merridan, brought cups of tea; and they sat on a bench under the trees, and Miss Merridan began to talk of her future plans, and of the Italian lakes.

Jeronime's attention wandered from the subject in hand. The funeral had impressed her. It occurred to her that she should like to see this great cemetery on the Resurrection Morning. It would be like seeing a sudden advent of spring. Through all these hundreds of mounds the spirits would burst crocus-like. Some of the monuments were horribly ugly and heavy, some of the graves were sadly unkept; but that would no longer matter on the joyful day, when the dead arose all newly dressed in the "spiritual bodies" that St. Paul wrote about.

No one would look at what had covered them then, any more than one notices the old sheath of a bud after it has fallen away. Jeronime fancied that there would be a soft, grey mist at first, as there often is before a brilliant day. The spirits would stand quivering in their bright array, as daffodils and snowdrops quiver in a breeze. Then there would be the sound of the call, and the breaking of a great light, and they would be drawn up, up, in a many-coloured rainbow from the earth. She smiled at the vision, just as she had often smiled to herself when she had played by the sea as a child.

"Ah! Jeronime, you can smile when I talk of our approaching separation," said Miss Merridan; for a wonder she did not add, "but you have no heart," but only said leniently, "But then, of course, you have no imagination."

"No, godmother," said Jeronime, "but I've good strong arms, haven't I? Look, I've made that grave very tidy. Perhaps I may be useful to some one yet."

It seemed to Jeronime afterwards that she had failed to take advantage of her opportunity that afternoon. She had had Miss Merridan all to herself for hours, and it was the last long, undisturbed *tête-à-tête* she ever had with her self-appointed guardian. The doctor never again kept out of the way for a whole day.

Some five weeks later she was sitting all by herself by the window of the flat when the parlourmaid brought up a card, and said that a gentleman wished to see Miss Joy. Jeronime jumped up in a joyful hurry and ran to meet her visitor. She did not even glance at the card, so sure was she that she knew

who the gentleman must be. When she encountered Quentin Mavis's square, short little figure, and saw his round face beaming at her in the doorway, her disappointment was evident.

"Oh! oh! I thought it was Mr. Knight!" she cried.

Quentin was momentarily chagrined. He flattered himself that at any rate he was quite as interesting as that old fogey. Then his good-humour and his saving sense of fun came to the rescue.

"But since you were going to be so very pleased to see him, and he isn't here, could you not pass some of the welcome on to me, Miss Joy?" said he.

"I can't pass on Mr. Knight's welcome," said Jeronime, dimpling and blushing a little, though she did not know why. "But I *am* glad to see you too! It is nice to see some one from the country. Isn't London horrid?"

"No," said Quentin; "not when you know your way about. It doesn't seem to suit you, though."

She did not look so superabundantly strong and well as usual, he thought, but she was prettier than ever.

"I am lucky to find you alone, for I have something rather important to tell you."

Jeronime opened wide eyes of surprise. "I am nearly always alone, except at meals, and very often then," she remarked. "Godmother is going to marry Dr. MacIlvert early in next month. What have you to tell me? I wish it were something very nice. I think it is the turn for something good to happen. Has some one left me a fortune?"

"Why, what made you say that? Are you a witch, Miss Joy?"

Jeronime clapped her hands. "I believe some one *has!* Why, I was just talking nonsense. I did not really think it. Did I make a true guess?"

"No," said Quentin slowly, "for it is not a fortune by any means. It is just one hundred and fifty pounds!"

Jeronime gasped. "One hundred and fifty pounds! But that's a great deal. It is more than I have ever had in my life. One could live for a long time on a hundred and fifty pounds."

She sat silent for a minute, and Quentin watched her inquisitively.

"But who has left me one hundred and fifty pounds?" she asked at last.

"A client of my father's. A man who was old enough to be your father," said Quentin. "As a matter of fact he did not exactly leave that sum of money to you. He left some china vases, nominally to me, but with a verbal understanding that they were to be sold for your benefit. They fetched a hundred and fifty pounds at Christie's sale last week."

"But why? And if he wanted me to have the money, why did he do things in such a roundabout way?" said she.

She was frowning with perplexity. Jeronime hated a mystery. Then a sudden idea came to her as she remembered how he had stood by her at that dinner-party.

"You are not pretending all this because you are sorry for me, and because you think I may want money, are you?"

"Good gracious, no! I have not got a hundred and fifty pounds to throw about, and if I had I should not dream of insulting you by doing that," said Quentin.

She flushed scarlet; she was the funniest mixture of child and woman still.

"No, of course you would not. How dreadfully silly of me! Please forget that I said such a ridiculous thing. It surprised me so that I don't know what to think. But I am not always so silly," said poor Jeronime.

"Not but what if I could I would. I mean that I—I should like to be useful to you. You weren't silly if you saw that," stammered Quentin, suddenly becoming nervous in his turn.

"But who was it? Why should any one wish to leave anything to me? I have not got any relations, you know. At least——" There was a pause. "Was it——? Do you suppose it might possibly have been—my father?"

The last words came out in a whisper. Quentin Mavis nodded.

"He didn't want people to know about it," he said. "I daresay you could easily find out who he was with this clue in

your hand, but I should advise you not to. There would be no particular use in the knowledge."

"Oh, I *don't* want to," said Jeronime. She flung out both her hands with a gesture of repudiation. Her gesticulations were those of her French mother. Tears, angry tears, that she would not let fall, rose in her eyes. Quentin was stirred to his very soul by the sight of them. He spoke in a tone that was meant to express kindness and respect. It was not his fault that mere kindness does not make a man's voice shake, and that respect does not wax so warm.

"It was his loss," he said. "He missed a lot by not knowing you."

"I think that I won't have his money," said Jeronime, slowly. "I think that he might have shared whatever he had with my mother. I think that I am too much ashamed of my father to like to touch anything that ever was his."

"Oh, but he wasn't so bad as all that," said Quentin.

He thought of De Grouchy, who had certainly fascinated him, and he shook his head.

"I say you can't judge of what you know nothing whatever about!" he cried. "You can't judge a man like—like your father. You've seen nothing! You understand nothing! You can't possibly know!"

"I don't wish to know," said Jeronime, "but I needn't take his money."

"He was on his death-bed," said Quentin, "and he was trying in a sort of way to square things, to make up." Somehow he was sorry that wavering death-bed intention should be baulked. "It's right for girls to be horrified at—at—well, it's right that they should not understand; but if one really does not know all about a fact, it's safest always to do the kindest thing, isn't it?"

"I daresay you are right," said Jeronime.

She liked Quentin; she knew instinctively, just as her father had known, that he was thoroughly trustworthy.

"But I suppose he must have deserted Maman," she said. "Though I am a girl, I cannot help knowing that it must be very mean of a man not to want his own child and to desert

his child's mother. I don't see how he could 'make up. People can't square what is not square. I don't want to take part in pretending that they can."

"Oh, but you are wrong! You can't go through life in that spirit," said Quentin. He admired this uncomprising little person, but he shook his head at her. "And what am I to do with this if you don't take it? *I* can't keep it, for it is not mine. Are you the only person in the world who must keep a conscience?"

He produced a sealed packet. "It is in bank-notes. You had better count them," he said.

Jeronime eyed the packet with some interest, but did not stretch out a hand for it.

"I believe the right thing to do would be to put them in a hospital box," said she, but then her high horse stumbled. "It seems such a dreadful pity, too, when I should so much like to have some money of my own!" whereat they both began to laugh.

Jeronime had been far too grave of late. At seventeen no one should be habitually serious, but her youth woke to a sense of comradeship, and the laugh did her good.

"Oh, if I were your sister, if I were Lucy or Mabel, what would you advise me to do?" she asked. "But of course if I were your sister there would have been no question of this kind. Mr. Mavis would have been my father, and how funny" —(with a recollection of Mr. Mavis)—"how funny that would have been! No, no"—as Quentin looked offended—"I didn't mean how *funny*, I meant how strange!"

"He was the straightest man in the world," said Quentin. "Every one who knew him knew that. Yes, I daresay you thought him just 'a funny little man.' He didn't look imposing, I suppose, and he liked his joke. He wasn't little in reality, though. It is not little to be the kind of fellow who has never done a shabby action in his life, whose least word is as good as an oath, who never took advantage of any one, and whose honour was—was as clean as a lady's hand," said Quentin.

His unexpected burst of feeling moved Jeronime. They understood each other with the freemasonry of youth.

"You are so lucky!" she cried. "It must be so very lucky to have had such a father. What you said just now reminded me of what King David said about the man 'Who hath not taken reward of the innocent, nor given his money upon usury,' and 'who sweareth to his neighbour and disappointeth him not, though it were to his own hindrance.' Dear Mr. Knight is like that too. That is the kind of person one can put confidence in, you know," said Jeronime solemnly.

But Quentin did not appear quite pleased. "As to Mr. Knight, of course he is quite a decent old chap; but he is a great deal too rich," he remarked, somewhat grudgingly. Then he returned to the question of the legacy. "You had better invest that bit of money at once. If you are still meaning to give it to a hospital, *I* will keep it till—till you have become more sensible."

"You can't. It's not yours!" said Jeronime.

"Oh yes, I can," said Quentin, and his small, kind eyes twinkled just as his father's had sometimes twinkled when he had advised crotchety and cantankerous clients. "I can, for the man who left the vases to you had implicit faith in me! He and I and you know about this affair; and *he's* not in this world now!"

"And your conscience, which knows it's mine?" said Jeronime.

"My conscience stands by me," said little Quentin firmly. "My conscience knows its duty too jolly well for it to let me see your pride chuck away one hundred and fifty pounds!"

"Very well. I won't chuck it away; I'll lock it up in my desk," said Jerome.

"Don't let that—don't let any one guess where you've put it," said Quentin. "I say, that was a queer business the other night, wasn't it? Is Miss Merridan really going to marry that fellow who does conjuring tricks?"

Jeronime shrank back, her anxious gravity returned.

"Don't talk about it, please. I don't understand it," she said.

"But what will you do?"

"Find Mère Marthe!" she replied. "Now that I have all that money of my own I shall certainly find her."

She jumped up as if to end the discussion.

"I'll fetch my desk. We will put my fortune safely away at once," she said, with the friendly, pretty smile that Quentin liked.

She ran up to her room and returned with a little brown leathern desk in her hands. There was a nest-egg of sovereigns laid by already, which she showed to the young man with naïve satisfaction. There was also a shell or two, and some bits of glass that had been crusted and rounded by the sea till they appeared like some kind of half-opaque green pebble.

"I have had these since I was a tiny little girl. They came over from France with me," Jeronime explained, handling them tenderly.

"How queer that you should have kept that rubbish!" said Quentin.

She looked at him as if he had spoken irreverently of some holy relic.

"Rubbish! They are the things I am fondest of! I never showed them to any one before. I wish that I had not shown them to you."

"Nonsense!" said Quentin. "You ought to have had brothers and sisters, then you wouldn't mind if some one laughed at what you liked. You'd know it made no difference. I say, Miss Joy, please forgive me, for I should very much like to be your friend."

"Mr. Knight is my greatest friend, you know," said Jeronime. "But of course you would be different, for you are quite young, like me. You would be some one to laugh with—more like a sort of brother, I suppose?"

"Not at all; I should not be in the least like a sort of brother," said Quentin firmly. "Sisters are all very well, but I've enough of them. I should be quite different altogether."

"Oh, well——" said Jeronime doubtfully.

"Will you give it a trial?" said Quentin, and on that understanding took his leave.

It was difficult to find a moment in which to tell Miss

Merridan of the fortune. When the doctor was not actually present in the flesh, he still occupied Lucilla's thoughts. Jeronime felt as if they were driving towards a precipice! The doctor held whip and reins; poor godmother willingly occupied the place by his side, and she herself was borne along helplessly on the back seat. She no doubt would jump off before they got to the abyss, but she wished she could have twitched the reins out of that driver's hands. She became graver and more silent as that inevitable wedding-day grew near. One day Dr. MacIlvert rallied her on her gravity.

"Come, come, Miss Joy, we shall have to find a husband who'll teach you how to laugh a bit!"

Jeronime was angry, and perhaps he had meant to tease; for no one, not even a very thick-skinned gentleman, can be constantly in the company of unmitigated dislike and contempt without either resenting or defying it.

"No, no, Wallace! Dear little Joy is not old enough to dream of husbands. You must not talk to her in that way, she does not like it," said Miss Merridan.

"Why, I assure you that little girls begin to dream of love at thirteen, my dear lady," said the doctor. "Not old enough? Why, she's as red as a rose! But the fact of the matter is that Miss Joy doesn't like anything about me. What's to be done, eh? I can't re-make myself to please her. I very much fear that I shall be a great ugly fellow with a red beard and a coarse liking for a joke to the end of my days. At any rate until my hair turns white, and gout subdues my spirits. I shall certainly have gout, for you treat me to such excellent dinners, you know."

The perplexity which often possessed Jeronime's simple soul deepened. The doctor was so jolly and good-humoured. How was it he could play such mean tricks?

"I don't mind your having red hair, and making jokes and being ugly—it's not that," said she, whereat he laughed again, being perfectly aware that he was not ugly in most women's eyes.

He did not say, "Then what is it?" because he very well knew.

Yes, there it was! They all three knew, and the knowledge haunted them. Lucilla evaded and could not bear to face it. She had not courage enough to name the bogey, though (so strangely are women made) she was capable of marrying the doctor with it squinting over his shoulder!

Jeronime despised and hated him. And he himself? Well, his standard was low. He thought no shame of marrying a rich woman for her money, or of letting her pay his debts. He would probably have quoted the villainous proverb about all being fair in love and war, and yet he had played what even he knew was a low game on the night of that dinner-party. He did not quite repent, but Jeronime caused him some discomfort, because, though he did not care a fig what the child thought of him on her own account, yet to his own Master a man stands or falls; and though that Master may be thrust aside and crucified, shunted and mocked, yet will He be the judge of the soul He dwells in—the one infallible Judge, who alone can discern the difference between blindness and wilfulness, who alone can pull up tares, but leave the growing wheat untouched.

Jeronime reflected the opinion of that disowned Master, who was imprisoned somewhere in the doctor's nature, and who would some day come to His own.

"Joy seems to imagine that my house is not big enough to hold both you and herself, Wallace," Lucilla said to him one day. "But what am I to do?"

"I am inclined to agree with the young lady. Did I not suggest a husband?" said the doctor.

"She hankers after the old nurse who can really be nothing but a faint childish dream to her, but whom she fancies she remembers."

"Then let her go to find her," said the doctor. "What can be more harmless and correct than a wild-goose chase after an old nurse!"

"She cannot go alone," said Lucilla, "and I do not entirely approve of the idea. Yet it would be good for Joy to see something of France. I might send her with Miss Williams, who was my governess when I was a girl, and who would be

only too delighted to chaperone her. It would satisfy that obstinate child, and—and I always try to be very kind to Joy."

"Yes! Send her abroad for a year," said the doctor heartily. "I shall want my wife to myself, Lucy."

No one else had ever been allowed to call her "Lucy." It was such a homely and unpoetical version of Lucilla, but somehow when it fell from his lips she liked it.

Jeronime wondered up to the last moment whether something would happen to prevent the consummation of the doctor's triumph. Nothing intervened. That successful gentleman took Lucilla Merridan to wife with great fervour and cheerfulness.

Lucilla wept when she bid her adopted child goodbye. The doctor held out his hand.

"You *won't*, eh?" he said. "Well, you are very silly, my dear girl. The thing's done now; and you should never quarrel with your bread-and-butter."

The allusion to her bread-and-butter nearly choked Jeronime. Did that depend on him now? But it never should. She would rather sweep a crossing.

She stood at the door of Abercrombie Mansions and stared after the carriage that took Dr. and Mrs. MacIlvert to the station. She wondered with all her might what would be the outcome of all this. Would godmother be happy with that dreadful man, or would he bully her? Jeronime shivered, feeling the world a little comfortless. One or two people glanced wonderingly at her as they passed in and out of the Mansions. It is not customary to stand quite still on a London pavement, but Jeronime never could learn town ways. At last some one touched her arm.

"Well, little miss! So Miss Merridan has married the rogue, and left you *planté la*," said a familiar voice.

Jeronime turned with a shout of joy and embraced her old friend without more ado.

Then she laughed and very nearly cried, and greeted him with eyes that were brimful of gladness, apology, and honest affection.

"Dear Mr. Knight, I couldn't help doing that, for I *am* so glad to see you again! I have missed you so dreadfully," she cried. "I know that I ought not to kiss you in the middle of a London street, but you don't mind, do you?"

Mr. Knight laughed too.

"Well, no, my dear, I do not mind in the least; indeed, I almost fancy that I rather liked it," he said.

"Will you share my lunch?" asked Jeronime eagerly. "Godmother forgot to order it, but Jane remembered, and has got in two chops. You like chops, don't you? It's lucky it is such a very gentlemanly lunch to-day!"

"I should prefer to take you out with me," he said; "I do not wish to eat Mrs. MacIlvert's chop, Jerry!"

"Ah, you are still angry," said Jeronime. She became very grave. "There is no use in being angry," she said. "Do you know, I do not believe that godmother could help marrying Dr. MacIlvert any more than a small raindrop can help running down the window-pane into a big drop. It is horrible all the same! Well, I'll go and tell Jane that I shan't want my chop, and then I will be ready to go with you."

Mr. Knight nodded. She had grown up a good deal, he thought. Jeronime, when she sat beside him in the hansom, observed that *he* was growing down. He was greyer, and he stooped more. The silent observation brought a new gentleness into her manner. Jeronime's protective instinct was strong. Fundamentally she was very womanly. The oddly-assorted couple of friends enjoyed their lunch together at an Italian restaurant with whole-hearted enjoyment. Jeronime confided all her plans to Mr. Knight without reservation.

"It is good of godmother to arrange for me to go to France, isn't it?" she said.

"*I* am going to France too," said Mr. Knight quietly; "I have a very old friend in Paris, a Monsieur Colomb. He has married since last I saw him. He has often invited me to stay with him. Until now I have never experienced the inclination to accept his invitation, but of late I have occasionally felt lonely. Madame Colomb is younger than her

husband by a good many years. A foolish sort of wedding that, eh?"

"Yes," said Jeronime heartily. "People should marry when they are young, or else not at all. When they get elderly, like godmother and Dr. MacIlvert, it *does* seem too ridiculous of them to be thinking of such things, doesn't it?"

Mr. Knight did not reply. It occurred to Jeronime that he was depressed.

"I am so glad that you are going to Paris," she declared earnestly. "The Yellow House is very nice! It is the most beautiful house in the world, but I don't believe it is a good house to live all alone in. Beside, when I have found Mère Marthe, I shall want to tell you all about how and where I found her. It will be a great blessing to know that you will still be on my side of the water, and that a letter will get an answer from you very soon."

"And if you do not find her, my dear?"

"Oh, I *must*," said Jeronime. "And I am sure that I shall! In my heart I am quite sure of that. Perhaps I may never find Maman, but I shall find Mère Marthe."

"And the sea?" said he. "Jerry, when I first found you (what a funny little thing you were to be sure!) you had been searching vainly for Mère Marthe, and Maman, and the sea. You are very persevering!"

"It was a lucky chance for me that you were there at the end of the search," said Jeronime, with hearty gratitude.

"I am going to write down the address of Monsieur Colomb's house in Paris, and you must keep it carefully and write to me as soon as ever you and Miss Williams get to St. Malo," said Mr. Knight.

He did not intend to leave matters to chance this time. When Jeronime's search was ended, whether for good or ill, Mr. Knight meant most certainly to be there.

PART II

CHAPTER XV

IT was early morning at sea. Two or three of the passengers in the St. Malo boat were on deck tasting the salt, sharp freshness of the new day. Jeronime was among them. She stood with the wind blowing colour into her cheeks, and gazed at the tumbling, choppy sea with real delight. She was a born sailor; she had not been sick, but she hated the warm cabin, with its odour of brandy and eau-de-cologne. She had escaped from it with great satisfaction. Now she was intensely happy, with that most exquisite exhilaration which runs through youth's veins like new wine when it makes a venture into the unknown. She was quite by herself. Miss Williams had failed her at the last moment and when all preparations had been made, but she had been so set on finding Mère Marthe, that nothing short of an actual physical impossibility would have prevented her from starting.

The boat pitched and curtseyed, and Jeronime could only just manage to keep her feet, but she laughed with pleasure when she felt the spray on her face and it seemed to her that she had often been landsick for the living, moving water under her. When the day broadened and the first pale gleam of sun made a streak of light across the waves, she knew that never in her short life had she seen anything so lovely as the tender opal colours of the blending sea and sky. But she was certainly extremely hungry! There lay the only and increasing drawback to her joy. Miss Williams would probably have brought food! Jeronime had had two small biscuits in her

pocket, and she had expended one on the seagulls, because she enjoyed seeing them swoop unerringly to pick up bits.

There was one other lady on deck. She too had fled from the stuffiness of the cabin, but she was handsomely provided with sandwiches, and a sailor had brought a large cup of tea to her. Jeronime wondered where she had seen this lady before. She did not recollect that she had seen her standing by a grave in Kensal Green, and she would have been surprised indeed had she known that she was looking at her father's widow.

Presently Mrs. de Grouchy held out a packet of sandwiches. She was tempting the girl, just as the girl had been tempting the seagulls.

"Will you share with me?" she said. "I cannot possibly eat all this, and this keen air must make you hungry, since you are evidently such a good sailor."

"I am rather hungry," said Jeronime. "But I don't think that I ought to eat up your breakfast."

Mrs. de Grouchy smiled. Jeronime did not know then how rare her smiles were.

"Since we are the only two women in the boat who seem capable of breakfasting, I think that we should share our triumph. Will you not sit beside me?"

"Oh, isn't this nice?" said Jeronime, complying.

She was not often expansive to strangers, but for once she really needed an outlet for her emotions. The beautiful old town founded upon a rock was not yet visible, but she looked out with happy, expectant eyes; at any moment a fairy city might appear on the horizon.

"This must surely be the first time you have been out of England?" said Mrs. de Grouchy.

"No," said Jeronime. "I was born over there," she nodded towards France. "I have always wanted to go back, and now, at last, I am on the way!"

Mrs. de Grouchy looked at her companion attentively. The girl was beautiful in rather a peculiar and not quite English style. The round, full chin, and broad brows, and smooth, fair skin, reminded one of the type of Bretonne one

may see in the country round Auray, but the violet eyes, set wide apart, were Jeronime's own. Something about her—perhaps her evidently keen and independent capacity for enjoyment—seemed reminiscent of—some one. The thought of her husband was never out of Emma de Grouchy's mind, or the longing for him out of her heart; it may have been because she held him so near that she could not catch and pin that elusive resemblance. She was strangely drawn to this girl, but she did not at first know why. "I suppose your friends are down in the cabin?" she said presently.

"Oh no, I am alone."

"Quite alone?" said Mrs. de Grouchy, surprised.

"I had to come alone," said Jeronime. "You see, Miss Williams had got jaundice. There was no use in waiting for her, for she wrote that it would be months before she was 'fit for that terrible crossing.' I could not give up the idea."

"It is not a difficult journey," said Mrs. de Grouchy. "Of course some one will meet you on landing."

"No," said Jeronime honestly. "No one will meet me, because no one knows that I have started."

"Oh," said Mrs. de Grouchy. It was that round, disapproving "Oh" which speaks such unanswerable volumes.

They finished their breakfast silently after that. Mrs. de Grouchy had no desire to burden herself with an unnecessary responsibility, but she could not but feel uneasy about this strange damsel, who was so obviously unsophisticated, and so much too pretty to play an unprotected *rôle*. When they reached the landing-place she could not forbear looking again at Jeronime. She did not care about making acquaintance with strangers; she was not particularly fond of girls; she was shy of meddling with other people's concerns, but all the same she knew she should never be able to sleep in peace if she let this girl slip away quite by herself in a French town.

Jeronime returned her glance with a frank smile.

"How delicious it is to hear all those men talk French!" she said. "Please, would you mind just telling me of a nice hotel to go to for to-night? By to-morrow I hope I shall have found the person I am looking for."

The person she was looking for! Who could have been so mad as to let this pretty child go to St. Malo to "look" vaguely for some one?

"You had better come with me to the Hotel de France," said Mrs. de Grouchy. "I shall sleep there with my maid to-night. Have you any luggage and any money with you?"

She asked the last question severely. It had occurred to her that Jeronime might have run away from a school at Southampton.

"Yes, of course I have," said Jeronime indignantly; "I should never have thought of taking a journey without a box. I have plenty of money too. It is in English notes, though. Are you sure you do not mind my going to your hotel? I could easily find another." The steamer was boarded now by an influx of blue-bloused Frenchmen. "One of these men could tell me about hotels or lodgings, I daresay," said Jeronime.

She had been slightly offended by the suggestion that she might be penniless and boxless. She was absolutely undismayed, and absolutely ignorant. Mrs. de Grouchy took her firmly by the arm.

"I should like you to come with me," said she.

Her voice held a gentle compulsion. Jeronime yielded, for she was not so obstinate in small matters as she was in big ones. She had spoken the truth when she had said she *could* not give up going to France. The search for Mère Marthe was one of those deep-rooted purposes that grow with the bodily growth, and become the stronger for suppression. There are people who possess ideas, and others who are possessed by them. The people who are possessed do brave and wonderful, and sometimes very cruel, things. Mrs. de Grouchy, like Jeronime, was one of those who are liable to possession. She, too, saw one thing at a time, and never squinted at side views. At present she saw James de Grouchy in purgatory, and she was bent on paying his debts, which, alas! were many and strange.

She could not have known, but perhaps she instinctively felt, that he had owed something to Jeronime.

. . . . .

Mère Marthe was very near her end. She lay on her side in the queer bed that was like a deep wooden chest, and which shut up, fitting into the wall, when not in use. Her mind frequently wandered; it took excursions into the world that had been her world when she was strong and able, and sometimes it wandered further still, to the world of her childhood; but every now and then she was perfectly aware of her surroundings. At such times she would pull herself up by the sides of her bed, and would peer out with restless, angry eyes at what she considered the prevailing mismanagement. She did not say much, partly because she was too weak to talk above a whisper, and partly because submission to Fate was in her peasant blood, and she knew that she was dying.

A neighbour came in daily to look after the old woman and to keep the room tidy. Mère Marthe disliked the neighbour's method of washing, dusting, sweeping, and cooking; it seemed to her that everything was done wrong from beginning to end. She felt under no obligation to the neighbour, because she had agreed to leave all her bits of furniture to this woman as payment for service rendered up to the day of death. The longer Mère Marthe lived the better was the bargain for her, and for that reason she certainly desired to live as long as possible, but otherwise she had had enough of life.

She yearned after the three sons whom the sea had taken, and felt that she could have departed in peace if they, or even one of them, had been by, ready to step into her worn-out shoes. Then nothing would have troubled her! Every one must die, and must leave to other hands the things that have been held awhile. That is fair enough. It is the universal rule, and Mère Marthe knew that she had lived longer than many, and had had her turn. But she hated to think that the neighbour would handle with possession the treasures that should have belonged to the sons. She had no relations alive; it had been quite right to make the arrangement she had made, but when her brain was muddled she fancied that she had defrauded her own flesh and blood.

In the night, when Mère Marthe was by herself, and the neighbour had gone home, Nocodeme and Paul and Yves

would walk in, dripping from the sea, and stand around her bed, but when she stretched out her withered old arms they only grasped emptiness. Then she would cross herself and try feebly to turn on the other side.

"My sons are with the Holy Mother of God and with her little Christ," she would say to herself. She always thought of Christ as a child in arms, perhaps because motherhood had been the strongest and divinest power in her own life.

In March the west wind blew hard, and the sound of the sea could be heard above the noise of the cobble-stoned street. That was the month in which the boat went down. For every boat is *the* boat to some woman who waits. Mère Marthe thought oftenest of her sons then; but in August Mademoiselle du Clos's fair-haired baby had been carried away, and in August old Marthe's fancies were haunted by Nanon Jeronime. That nursling had come next to her own children in the old woman's affections.

When she had been washed, and when the cleaning of her room was finished, the daily irritation that kept Mère Marthe in touch with the present was over for the time. Then her spirit went back into the past, groping blindly like a bewildered ghost.

On a windy day, and in this same room, had Jeronime been born. Mère Marthe smiled grimly at that recollection. She had not fetched a doctor! She could do very well without one, and for her part she never believed much in them on such occasions. It was a woman's business. Yes, yes, they had done excellently well. The baby was a splendid child, and the mother, whatever her faults might be, had a fine spirit and a healthy body. Mademoiselle du Clos had been depressed and sullen beforehand, and Marthe, observing her ringless hand, had not wondered at that; but she had plucked up courage, she had got well with commendable rapidity; and how the baby had thrived! What an appetite Nanon Jeronime had! Mère Marthe had pretended to grumble. She eats enough for two," she had declared, but in reality she had never grudged the child a mouthful. No, no! her conscience was clear about that.

How the baby could kick and shout and laugh! What a pretty little girl she became! People turned to stare at her when she trotted after her foster-mother up the street. Mère Marthe had been secretly proud. But to think that Nanon Jeronime had been sold like a little pig! Mère Marthe never would believe that the mother had *not* actually sold her. The woman who would part with her four-year-old child was akin in soul to Judas, who sold the Holy Christ. "I ought to have hidden the poor little angel from their greedy, wicked eyes," Mère Marthe told herself. "I should never have let her go. Who can tell what has become of her?"

When she had been well she had known that she was in no way to blame. She had protested with all her might against the transaction. But now sick fancies tormented her! Something strangely like a girl's white body was lying across the bottom of her bed. The more she stared at it the stronger became the illusion.

"What have they done to the poor, pretty innocent? What can they have done that I should see her lying there?" Mère Marthe muttered with increasing horror and indignation.

She tried to sit up in bed. She pointed with a shaking finger. Then the neighbour came in, and pulled the bed-clothes straight with an impatient jerk, and smoothed the horror away.

"There is nothing there! You are getting silly, Mère Marthe," said the neighbour, and stumped downstairs again and out into the street, where the cobble-stones were baking in the August sun, and even the hens were cross and pecky with the heat.

Of course there was nothing there! Nanon Jeronime was not lying across the foot of the bed, she was only playing on the beach.

"She will never come in till I go to fetch her. She has the obstinacy of a mule," the old woman muttered.

Presently she began to wonder whether it were twilight or dawn. She lost count of the hours being there all day long.

Had she had her middle-day *bouillon*, or was it quite early in the morning? If it were morning Baby Nanon's fluffy head would soon poke up over the edge of the wooden cot. The child always awoke like a little bird, with the daylight. Mère Marthe hoped that it might be early morning, and that a weary night—a night of bad dreams—was over.

But no, the shadows deepened, and she felt dimly that they clouded her brain. They were inside as well as outside of her.

There was a knock below. Some one rapped, first with knuckles, then with the handle of an umbrella. A sudden panic seized the poor old soul. Something strange was coming up the wooden stair and she lay helpless. She would have screamed when some one pushed her door ajar, but she had not enough strength, and she choked instead.

"Mère Marthe! Is Mère Marthe at home?" said a voice at the door.

Why, that was Mademoiselle du Clos's voice. It was high time, too, that she should come to look after her brat! Not that it was not the truth that Nanon Jeronime did very well without her.

"Come in, come in!" she tried to call. "Why do you stand there letting the dust blow through the house?"

The owner of the voice came in and stood by the bed, between Mère Marthe and the window, and turned out not to be Mademoiselle du Clos after all.

"What do you want?" said Mère Marthe.

She was no longer afraid. This was no alarming apparition This was a pleasant visitor. She made a great effort to raise herself, and was pleased to find that this stranger did not melt away. On the contrary, Mère Marthe clutched a firm, round young arm, and though her sense of smell was not so keen as it had been, she noticed that the girl had a bunch of pinks somewhere about her, and she nodded with satisfaction.

"Dreams don't smell," said she.

"I am not a dream. I am Nanon Jeronime," said the girl. "I came to France to find you again, Mère Marthe."

Mère Marthe laughed. It was the ghost of a laugh,

shrill and thin, and her face puckered into a thousand lines.

"Ah, ah! I know better than that; Nanon is big for her age, but she is not so big as you. What do you want, my dear?"

She liked the appearance of her visitor; she liked the golden brown hair and the fair face.

"I wish I could see you better. It is not so often that some one comes to see me," she whispered.

Jeronime looked pitifully at the tiny, shrivelled-up figure, at the wizened, mahogany-coloured face, in which the black eyes were the only points of life. Was this indeed Mère Marthe? Surely Mère Marthe had been a broad, strong person; but now she had shrunk to nothing! The coarse, not over clean little brown calico nightgown seemed to hide only skin and bone. A sharp pang of pain and disappointment assailed Jeronime. She had dreamt a dream and now rubbed her eyes, sadly awakened. Somewhere, somehow, some day, she had promised herself that she would find again the old woman who had been the best mother she had ever known. Now she had fulfilled her promise and accomplished her search, and now she knew that never, never again could she find what had been once.

"Who are you?" cried the old woman, with a sharp change of mood. Her claw-like, yellow fingers still clung to Jeronime's arm, but she was disturbed by the voice that was like the voice of Jeronime's mother.

"You have one person's voice and another person's face. Is there any sense in that? How am I to understand who you are when you have one person's voice and another person's face? Everything comes round my bed and worries me!" She began to whimper feebly like a fretful child. "Worries me and stares at me and then changes into some one else."

She let go her hold and sank back on her pillow.

Jeronime took off her hat, and stooping over the bed, brought her fresh face closer to the old woman's.

"Dear, dear Mère Marthe, I have not come to worry you,"

she said. "I am only Nanon Jeronime, but I have been a long time away from you, so I have grown quite big. You remember me, don't you? You always dressed me in the morning, and boiled the milk for my breakfast, and took me to the beach after breakfast, and fetched me home at bed-time. You taught me to say my prayers, and you scolded me when I was naughty, and you were very kind to me always."

She was very anxious that Mère Marthe should recognise her. She spoke very slowly and distinctly, but she knew that her careful French was not the language that Mère Marthe thought in. Alas! she had forgotten how to speak that.

Mère Marthe peered doubtfully at her, then touched her cheek, then smiled and nodded.

"Why, you *are* getting a big girl!" she said. "I had forgotten how big you are. You are too big to be playing on the sands all day! We shall be breaking the pear one of these fine mornings, but no one will marry you if you turn out an idler! Fie, Nanon! you should have come in before. Well, well, go eat your supper, *petite vaut-rien*. At once, do you hear? At once!"

Jeronime moved quietly away and sat in front of the open hearth on the chair which her mother had once occupied. She looked round her very sadly, and as she looked her surroundings spoke to her, and she dimly remembered.

Everything in the room was as it had been, only she and Mère Marthe were changed. She the fulfilment of the child, Mère Marthe the shadow of the woman who had once lived there. The small, painted chair was in its place, but Nanon Jeronime could no longer sit in it! The three-legged stool stood in front of her, her own old bowl was on the high shelf above her head. Yes, and there was the pear of which Mère Marthe had spoken.

It was a russet china pear, and it was not only a pear, it was also a very good money-box! Jeronime remembered it. It had been her very own! She lifted it reverently and looked for the slit into which she had dropped an occasional rare sou.

"When you are a great girl, and about to be married, we will break the pear and you shall have the money," Mère Marthe had declared.

An awful solemnity had attended the dropping in of those sous. When the coin had slid from the chubby, reluctant fingers the deed was done so irretrievably! There was only one way of getting at the contents of those primitive money-boxes: you had to smash them! It would certainly be impossible to venture on such a reckless action before one was quite grown up and on the very verge of matrimony. If one broke one's pear too soon, one would be covered with disgrace and a declared and shameful spendthrift!

Jeronime had often longed to have her sous back, but she never contemplated such wickedness as breaking the bank, and in a childish, awestruck way she always felt that when she deposited her money she gave something to the future Jeronime; to the Jeronime who would wear a cap and long gold earrings, and who would one day dance seriously through a long afternoon in the Place de la Cathédrale with a beautiful husband with whom she would have been to church. To give something to one's future self is enough to make any one grave!

A lump rose in Jeronime's throat as she turned the pear over in her hands. There were coppers in it still. Were they the sous she had put in? Had Mère Marthe kept them faithfully for her?

The room was stuffy and hot, but she shivered with a sense of spiritual cold and loneliness. Mère Marthe had fallen asleep, and now snored peacefully.

"She will soon die, and seeing her again has made me lose what I had before," thought Jeronime.

For in this strange, confusing meeting, where the shadow of the grave blurred the outline of Mère Marthe's character, even that obstinately cherished memory of her seemed to fade away and to elude her nursling. The bustling, capable old peasant woman to whom the baby girl had run for protection was gone for ever. This Mère Marthe, feebly scolding and whimpering on her bed, could protect no one.

The door opened. A woman bustled in, then stood transfixed with surprise at sight of the girl standing by the fireplace.

"I came to see Mère Marthe," said Jeronime.

She paused there, conquering a surprising inclination to tears. Her heart had sunk terribly. Never in her short life had she been so grievously shocked and disappointed. Miss Merridan's marriage with the doctor, though it had startled and puzzled her, had not actually hurt her so much as this failure of a most cherished dream.

Then, seeing that the woman still stared amazed, she explained further. "Mère Marthe took care of me once. I lived with her when I was a baby; that is why I have come to see her. The house door was open, and I went into the kitchen, but it was empty. I knocked, but no one came. Then I remembered the stairs and the room above. I wanted to find Mère Marthe very much, so I went up. Do you live here? Do you take care of her?"

Her French was a little stiff; she spoke slowly, but the neighbour followed her well enough, and nodded at each full stop with growing interest.

"Do I take care of her? Indeed, I do that!" she answered. "I get neither thanks nor pay, mamzelle, but *le bon Dieu* will reward me one day."

Mère Marthe's neighbour was a thin woman, with a lined, sharp face. She had lost all her teeth, so that her smile was unpleasing, disclosing toothless gums. She still stared hard at Jeronime.

"What? You lived here when you were a baby? Why, I know you! I know you perfectly well. I was eighteen the year that you went away. I was married just before you went. You trotted up to me on my wedding-day, and gave me a big shell for a present. '*Tiens*, Marie, it is a most beautiful present,' you said. 'The sea gave it to me, and I give it to you, Marie Monastière.' My mother scolded me for laughing. 'Take it! take it! It's unlucky to refuse the gift of a child,' she said. But to think that I should meet you again! You've forgotten me, no doubt?"

Jeronime rubbed her eyes, and felt as if she were Rip van Winkle.

If Marie Monastière had been eighteen then, she could be out thirty now! But she seemed to the girl an elderly woman Peasants age fast; every year's toil leaves its mark. They are used up at fifty.

"So you have come to find Mère Marthe. She is very old, very old indeed. She is as helpless as a baby in arms, but she is not neglected by any means, though I daresay she complained of me to you. She talks about you, mamzelle; she often talks about you. Sometimes she is more sensible than at other times. Shall I wake her up for you?"

"No, no," said Jeronime. "Please don't wake her."

"Then perhaps you would like to leave a little something for a remembrance, just to show that you thought of her? Where are you staying, mamzelle? I myself have a very nice room to let. For a wonder it is empty!"

"I am staying for the night at the Hotel de France, but I hoped that I might lodge with Mère Marthe," said Jeronime.

She stood in the midst of tumbling fragments of her castle in the air. "Who keeps the shop now?" she asked.

"Oh, that is sold to Monsieur Benoine. He has the whole house, with the exception of this room, which he lets to the old lady. All the furniture in it is her own. It would have killed her to have been moved. I live next door, but I run in and out. You could not stay here; there is no place for you, and you would be most uncomfortable, but with me you will do very well indeed. It is fortunate that I am ready for you, for every one knows that my room is engaged for weeks before the season begins. Eight francs a day, mamzelle, all included, and the best cooking in St. Malo. Come and see, come and see for yourself."

"I will go with you to see," said Jeronime. "But eight francs a day is too much; I am not rich."

She lingered a moment by Mère Marthe's bed. The small, wizened face was half hidden; one wrinkled hand lay outside the counterpane. What an immense amount of work those hands had done! They had washed and sewn and carried for

Jeronime. Now, alas! they were worn out; they could do no more. The dry, old lips were open. Mère Marthe still snored peacefully.

"Goodbye, dear, dear Mère Marthe," Jeronime whispered, and, stooping, kissed her.

CHAPTER XVI

MADAME COLOMB sat with her usually busy hands crossed on her lap, and leant back on the white pillows of her armchair, and most unwillingly thought about Jeronime, and about a chapter in her life which she had not the slightest desire to re-read. When she was well her will guarded her thoughts, but since her illness the guard had weakened and let haunting memories slip by. Was Jeronime's desire pricking her? Or was it only that she was tired and languid, and that recent events had brought back to her that day, long ago, when her first child had been born?

So long—so very long ago!

Despair and fury, not languid disappointment, had filled her breast, till the moment when her strong young life had risen up to battle with pain, and her fighting instinct had brought her courage. The sea had moaned, the wind had shaken the rough windows, Mère Marthe had given rough encouragement, and at last that undesired child had cried lustily.

"A strong child! A fine beauty! and at any rate God made her," Mère Marthe had said.

"Well, well, the baby had been a beauty! There could be no doubt about that, and she had thriven bravely in spite of rough surroundings. How plump her pretty little limbs had become, and, later, what a sturdy, happy spirit had glanced from the violet windows of her eyes! That had been a child worth the trouble of having. But now——" Madame smiled bitterly at the contrast.

She had not wanted Jeronime.

In those days there had been no room for a baby in her

arms, but since then a baby had been greatly longed for. Monsieur Colomb had set his heart on having a child; but of the two born to him the first had been a miserable little weakling, whose short life of nine months had been a constant wailing weariness, and the second had lived but for five painful days!

This last mishap had occurred lately, and Monsieur Colomb had been terribly cast down by it. He had prayed, nay, more, he had heavily bribed the saints, and after so long an interval his wife's expectations had seemed to him an almost miraculous answer to his fervent beseechings. He felt that Heaven mocked him when the little life he had begged so hard for flickered helplessly, and went out!

Madame Colomb also was in low spirits. She could not exert herself to cheer her husband; she was impatient of his grief, as if she felt in it some subtle accusation.

Three months had elapsed since the day of the child's death. The doctor declared that there was nothing radically wrong with Madame; he could not understand why her recovery was so slow. She had always been a woman of energy and industry, but now she clung obstinately to her bedroom. No one guessed how she sickened at the thought of resuming the ordinary routine of life. She had been a good and attentive wife to Monsieur Colomb, but just at present there were moments when she hated him.

Such feelings alarmed her. She thoroughly disapproved of them. She had never allowed for unreasonable emotions; she had imagined that such nonsense could always be suppressed and buried if one had common sense enough. Her life since her marriage had been planned on that hypothesis; she could not afford to believe otherwise. She frowned when she heard Monsieur Colomb's step in the passage. It was a frown of pain.

He entered the room without knocking. That was a tiresome habit of which she had never been able to cure him. He was bourgeois, but one cannot have everything. He sat down opposite to his wife, and delivered himself of a homily.

He assured her that she was making no effort. She ought

to be downstairs. There was no reason why she should not be sitting in her drawing-room, and receiving the condolences of his relations. His relations were becoming hurt and offended because they were not allowed to condole! She might at least take a drive in the Bois de Boulogne. Did she suppose that he kept a carriage for his own amusement? What use was there in paying for it if she did not condescend to sit in it? It cost him a great deal, but he had given way to the extravagance in order to please her. If she had no intention of being pleased, she should have said so before he bought the horses and engaged a coachman. In that case he might have kept the money in his pocket.

His voice waxed more and more peevish as he aired his grievances. When he was peevish it took a high, thin falsetto note, that jarred on Madame Colomb's musical ear, and his thick eyebrows twitched.

When she was in her usual health Madame never allowed herself to appear disturbed by her husband's fretfulness. She had some idea of fair-play, and she recognised that since he had provided the money and the home, it was but right that she should bring tact and good-temper to the establishment. The consciousness that she fulfilled her share in the bargain sustained her self-respect. At present she was not in her usual health. That was very apparent in her reply.

"There is no reason why I should not receive the condolences of your friends and relations, there is no reason why I should not drive a dozen times round the Bois de Boulogne, no reason whatever except that I have not the faintest desire to hold a reception, or to go for a drive," said she. "Of course my neck must slip into the collar again soon; I do not intend to remain for ever an invalid, but you might allow me a few more days' grace, Félix."

They both sighed, but their mutual grief held more recrimination than sympathy. Monsieur Colomb was aggrieved at his wife's failure to produce a healthy child, and his attitude awoke in her an anger that she knew was morbid and foolish, and that scared while it burnt her.

"Little Gaston Colomb was here this afternoon. He came

to inquire after your health on the part of our cousins. His mother has presented Edouard with an eighth child. A fine, big boy!" Monsieur Colomb remarked enviously.

Madame shrugged her shapely shoulders contemptuously.

"Already the soup is thin in that *ménage!* Suzanne should be ashamed of herself! What do they want with another mouth?"

"It is true they have plenty of sons and not too much money. It is strange that affairs should be so ordered," said Monsieur Colomb.

A flash of impatience blazed for a moment in Madame Colomb's eyes. "Strange? It is hardly strange, *mon ami!* Edouard was twenty-three and Suzanne nineteen when they married. You should have taken a wife when you were twenty-three! Then by this time it is possible that you might have had as many grandchildren as Queen Victoria had!"

The old man jumped up stammering angrily. "Ah, you—you mock at me! You laugh at my white hairs. You are not good, Nanon! No, you are not what I once believed you to be! You have no veneration! That is why my prayers are not answered. That is why no blessing rests on us. I have long suspected it. I saw you smile, yes! I saw a wicked, mocking smile on your lips when the priest fastened my relique of the powder from the bones of St. Barbare round the neck of our dear little dying boy. You fancied I did not notice your want of faith, but you were wrong. I do not always speak, but I observe more than you suppose! Though you laugh at me, I am not yet quite blinded by age! 'If God wills it, my son may yet be cured,' I said. I had faith—Nanon," his voice shook pitifully—"at least I tried to have it. But your smile was a blight on our hopes. In your heart you sneered at Heaven. If you could mock then, you could mock at anything. Nothing is holy to you! Nothing is sacred! I believe that if we needed napoleons you would not shrink from selling the cross itself to a Jew! You would sell your own child for—*mon Dieu!* what have I said? Brute that I am! Nanon, I did not mean it! My treasure, I did not in the least mean one word of it!"

Madame had turned white as her pillow. The red-brown eyes, that certainly did shine with mockery at times, were shut.

Monsieur Colomb gazed at her with helpless dismay. He had an irritable temper, suffering had rasped it, but he had not a bad heart.

Madame opened her eyes and walked slowly to the window, then stepping on to the little balcony, stood leaning against the iron balustrade. Below her the gay, busy life of Paris flowed ceaselessly. She had once loved Paris, now she loathed it. It occurred to her that she had only to lean a little further, and to let go her hold on the ironwork, and she need never slip her neck in that harness again! She was really very sick of the whole game, though she had endeavoured to play it fairly according to her own lights. Félix was not clever, he would never guess that anything but an accident caused her death. Her heart leaped up for a moment, then she rebuked it sharply. What mad folly had possessed her? Was she the kind of despicable fool who must needs throw up the cards because the play is not always in her favour? Her hand tightened on the balustrade for a second, then she turned round and stepped back into her room, which felt hot and airless on that August afternoon.

"I turned faint, but it was nothing! It has passed off," she said. "I did not mean to laugh at your age, *mon ami*. We surely are both old enough to see the absurdity of quarrels! The day is close. The heat makes you a trifle nervous, Félix. As for me, I have not slept well of late and am more than a trifle unreasonable. Will you leave me now? I will try to have a nap. Perhaps I shall wake in a better temper."

"But it was my fault, my angel!" cried the old man.

His wife was taller than he was, a fact which greatly annoyed him, and she held her head so high that it was difficult to kiss her. He attempted the feat now, being much ashamed of his outburst. Madame Colomb endured the kiss with an effort. When he had gone she locked the door, and walked up and down the room with unsteady steps.

"You would sell your child—you would sell your own

child!" she kept repeating, "and for *this* you are a bad woman."

But presently she pressed her lips firmly together and rang the bell.

"I am going to change my dress and to go for a drive this evening in the Bois de Boulogne," she said to the maid who answered the summons. "Go and tell Monsieur Colomb that I shall take his advice, if he will be so kind as to order the carriage and to drive with me."

Monsieur Colomb sent back an amicable message, and she made her toilette with care. She had taken their quarrel as a warning. She had no intention of degenerating into a *femme incomprise* (she heartily despised the species) or of falling into a habit of sparring with her husband. She had a good deal of dignity and of sense. When her toilette was completed the effect was excellent. Madame Colomb was pale, but her clear pallor enhanced the blackness of her finely pencilled brows. There were fine lines round her eyes and about the corners of her tightly shut lips, there were grey threads in her abundant hair, but she was, and always would be, a distinguished-looking woman. She had too much pride to be vain, but she had always known the worth of good looks, and she recognised that she owed it to Monsieur Colomb to look her best.

He was waiting for her in the hall.

"All the best of the day is over! You should have decided earlier, but I suppose we may as well make the most of what remains to us!" he grumbled. "Why, what is the matter now? You start as if I had said something extraordinary."

"Did I start? But I agree with you, Félix," said Madame. "We will make the best of what remains to us. It is only cowards who do otherwise."

"Making the best of what remains." When a man or woman takes that standpoint, it is a sign of growing old. Youth either despairs or puts on a bold face and hopes in the future, but youth never says, "There are just so many bits of tarnished silver left to me. I must lay them out to advantage, knowing that they represent all I am ever likely to have now or hereafter."

Madame Colomb had reached that stage, and yet, because the mercy of Heaven is not bounded by our short sight, it may be that she counted wrong.

She exerted herself to talk gaily to Monsieur Colomb as she sat by his side in the carriage. She was not the woman to do anything feebly or by halves. Having made up her mind to slip her neck into the collar again, she would at least pull properly. And Monsieur Colomb cheered up responsively, forgetting his grievances and the qualms that sometimes beset him about his wife's lack of religion and its consequences.

"I have something to tell you," he said presently; "I hope that your affection for me will lead you to relinquish your prejudices and to receive my news with pleasure."

His pomposity covered some anxiety, for Anne's prejudices though few were very strong. She greatly disliked the sea, for example, and stubbornly refused to follow the doctor's advice about recruiting her health at some watering-place. She also suffered from Anglophobia to an absurd extent. She would walk out of a room if an Englishman walked into it.

"You have heard me speak of my long friendship for Thomas Knight."

"*Mon Dieu*, yes!" said Madame Colomb. "It is inherited, like the English port wine that his father presented to your father. You do not often taste it, so to speak, but it is a satisfaction to you to know that you possess it."

"But for once I intend to taste both the friendship and the wine," said Monsieur Colomb, twitching his eyebrows nervously. "My excellent friend has lately written to me to say that he finds himself in need of a change. For many years he has lived the life of a recluse, devoting himself to the compilation of a history of the ancient family whose house he now possesses. This erudite work is at length accomplished. He proposes to take a holiday, to seek a little recreation in Paris. He expresses a hope that he may be introduced to you. I know that you detest his nationality and make no secret of that fact, but——"

"I do, indeed!" said Madame sharply. "I assure you, Felix, that the English have the same unpleasant effect on me

that sandy cats have! I cannot eat my dinner in comfort if a cat is in the room—or if an Englishman sits next to me!"

Monsieur Colomb sighed. "Yes, yes, I know," he said; "there is no accounting for these dislikes. Perhaps they too are inherited. Perhaps in some past existence an Englishman harmed some ancestress of yours. Yet I should like you to be civil—even more than merely civil to this gentleman. His father was my father's friend, and the friendship began a generation before that, with our grandparents. The respect I have for Thomas Knight should surely outweigh the odd antipathy you experience at the idea of meeting him. I wish to ask him to stay with us."

He peered anxiously into her face. There were occasions on which Anne could be invincibly stubborn. To his relief she laughed.

"But how terribly serious we have become!" she said. "Yes, yes, invite your tom-cat to stay, since you wish to, Félix! I will be both civil and cordial to him! I will pat and stroke him! We will not dignify my nonsense with such a grand name as antipathy."

Monsieur Colomb patted the gloved hand that lay next him.

"Thank you, Nanon. You make a joke of your prejudices for my sake. You are very good, my angel."

"Oh, no doubt I shall like your Mr. Thomas Knight," she declared. Then a sick qualm of disgust assailed her; perhaps because she had been strangely stirred of late, had felt her soul flutter within her at the near approach of Death, and had hardly yet regained her firm grasp of life. For a moment she knew that she hated lies.

"And decidedly I am not good," she cried. "Ah, Félix, I am anything but good."

The Colombs were not a very hospitable couple. It was seldom that they invited a guest to stay with them. That, no doubt, was why Madame Colomb had a superstitious premonition that Mr. Knight's visit somehow marked a new era, and would prove to be of importance to her. She kept her foolishness to herself.

Twenty-five years had gone by since the two old friends had met; their affection had apparently depended little on propinquity. Both experienced something of a shock at the first meeting.

"Poor Colomb, he was certainly worn badly. To think he should have come to this! A little thin, shrivelled-up old fellow! Evidently dyspeptic, and a mere bundle of nerves!" thought Mr. Knight, as he grasped his friend's hand in a hearty clasp.

"Ah, Thomas Knight has changed sadly, very sadly," said Monsieur Colomb to his wife. "I remember him an alert, business-like person; cheerful, and of a fresh complexion. Very British in his ideas, but yet companionable and intelligent. Now he has the ways of a hermit. He speaks little. After all these years he has nothing to recount to me. He is uninterested in the politics of to-day. His face has a grey look that I do not like. He has aged terribly."

"But twenty-six years is no trifle," said Anne. "Think, *mon ami!* We have been married but thirteen, and in that time I have become middle-aged; double it, and I shall be old! Twenty-six years ago your friend was in the prime of life, you surely do not expect him to be as he was then."

"No, no, I am not imbecile," said Monsieur Colomb. "Of course I very well understand that time works changes. You, as you say, are considerably altered, I myself am doubtless older than I was, yet no one would fail to recognise me! My mind is as active, my interest in life as keen as ever. There is, in fact, very little change, beyond a slight deafness, which I should not feel if people would have the common civility to speak distinctly, and one at a time, instead of cackling all together like geese. Poor old Knight! I am truly sorry for him! I give you my word I scarcely recognised him at the station."

Yet when Mr. Knight was duly introduced to Anne, appearing fresh and spruce in his evening clothes, she secretly thought that he looked more than twelve years younger than her husband.

"I will confide to you a secret. Madame Colomb has an

absurd prejudice against your countrymen. I count on you to overcome it!" the host said in a stage aside.

Mr. Knight smiled pleasantly, and said that he hoped that he might persuade Madame to forgive his nationality. In reality he cared not a jot whether she forgave it or no, having a truly British indifference to the favour or dislike of strangers.

Madame Colomb impressed him as a very brilliant and handsome person. Monsieur Colomb had told him that she was also an excellent woman of business. Mr. Knight was apt to consider that a turn for business was rather unfeminine, and he slightly distrusted brilliancy. Anne, however, succeeded in entertaining him; for though a woman cannot enjoy her dinner if she be out of sympathy with her company, a man can, whereby he scores a point in the game of life.

The dinner was excellent. If this trio were widely apart mentally and morally, sundered by difference of nationality, habit, and creed, they at least could become convivial over the primitive functions of host and guests. At first, indeed, Mr. Knight scarcely contributed his fair share to the entertainment, his French being rusty, obsolete, and halting; but Anne at last came to the rescue and talked in English, and Monsieur Colomb rubbed his hands in high good-humour over her achievements.

"But imagine! She has always declared to me that she could not put a sentence together in your bar— in your language," he cried, chuckling.

"Madame Colomb speaks English so extremely well," said Mr. Knight, "that I am sure she must have been a great deal in the company of my compatriots. I am sorry that they did not dispel her prejudices."

Anne smiled her brilliant, enigmatical smile.

"Why, I say to you quite frankly that I have not liked, nor cats, nor the smell of musk, nor the English race; but one dislike is as little serious as the other, perhaps."

"Why, I know some one else who cannot bear cats, especially sandy cats, and who hates the smell of musk," said Mr. Knight.

He regarded Madame Colomb with friendlier eyes after that, because she shared a weakness of his favourite.

Monsieur Colomb congratulated himself on the way in which his friend and his wife were getting on. It seemed, indeed, that the little change of society had been just what Anne needed. Mr. Knight went on his own way all day. He had lived so much alone that he could not tolerate too much companionship. In the evening he always appeared, punctual, attentive and carefully dressed. From dinner-time till bedtime he devoted himself thoroughly to sociability, being upheld by a strong, old-fashioned sense of decorum and of what he owed to his hosts, and bringing to the task a somewhat formal but genuine politeness. He was very unlike that other Englishman whom Madame Colomb had once known, but the sound of his English tongue stirred her strangely, and she grew to like him.

One day he consulted her about some purchases which he had made—yards of soft flowered *crêpe-de-chine*, and a little jewelled brooch shaped like a basket of flowers.

"Have I bought enough of this stuff to make a lady's dress?" he inquired.

Madame Colomb shook out the shimmering lengths, and measured them along her arm.

"But it depends on the size of the lady! Is she so very large? It would more than make a dress for me!"

"Large! No; she is exactly the right height for a woman, and as slim as a girl of seventeen should be. Not thin, you understand, but certainly not a shade too fat."

A gleam of amusement crossed over Madame's face.

"But *seventeen!* *Mon Dieu*, these old men!" she exclaimed to herself.

A half-cynical curiosity about the future owner of the *crêpe-de-chine* was all that she felt, but something in the curl of her lip induced Mr. Knight to add, "It is for a lady whom I have had the honour to know since she was barely four years old. I used to buy dolls for her when we were first acquainted. Later her fancy ran to bulbs and seeds and watering-pots and spuds."

"And now she prefers silks and ornaments. They all do," said Anne, stifling a yawn.

"No," he answered, "Miss Jeronime has no vanity. She does not care much about her clothes. I fear that *I* am solely responsible for this folly."

"Jeronime," said Anne sharply! She chid herself for the foolish leap her heart gave. "Why," she asked herself, "why had she been so silly as to give that child—that forgotten child—so uncommon a name? Had she had the sense to have named her Marie or Louise she could have become accustomed to hearing other children so called without a qualm. She had never before come across another Jeronime.

"It has a quaint sound," she added lightly.

"Yes, it has a pretty sound," Mr. Knight agreed. "Nanon Jeronime! You should have heard her say it as I did. She had toddled away from her nurse, and hidden under the altar-cloth of a private chapel. She woke crying, perhaps a little frightened, but she was always a brave little soul. I can see her now, peeping out from under the altar. 'I look for Mère Marthe, and Maman, and the sea,' she said, 'but Maman looks not for Nanon Jeronime.'"

Anne, who had let the *crêpe-de-chine* fall, picked it up again.

"I believe I measured this wrong. I must try again with a yard measure," she said.

She carried it to a table a little way off and stood with her back to Mr. Knight. "Tell me more about Nanon Jeronime," she said over her shoulder.

But before Mr. Knight could reply (nothing loath, for he liked to talk of the child) Monsieur Colomb came in.

"What, what? Have you started a milliner's shop?" cried he. "What's all this mess over the table? What are you doing with a tape? You have disarranged the blotting-book, Anne!"

He was a slave to tidiness. He could never bear to see the least litter in the drawing-room. An ornament placed a hair's-breadth too much to right or left would distract him. Anne was fortunately a scrupulously neat person; that had been one of the attractions she had had for him.

"It is fortunate that there are no children here, Colomb," said Mr. Knight. "They would annoy you a hundred times a day."

He had not heard of the Colombs' misfortune, but he regretted the words the moment that they were out of his lips.

Poor old Colomb glanced at him, with an odd, angry, pathetic gleam, from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"Ah—ah—how dare you say that to me! You do not know how well I would—could have put up with them," he said brokenly.

His wife laid the folds of silk neatly together—she never left anything half done—then came across the room with her head held high. "Mr. Knight does not know indeed, Félix," she said, with some dignity. "We have lost our two children, Mr. Knight, therefore we take great care for our rooms, and our furniture, and our little treasures. One must always care for something—is it not so?"

She put her hand on Monsieur Colomb's arm.

"I beg your pardon a hundred times," said Mr. Knight.

The loyal "we" pleased him. His respect for Madame Colomb grew. He would not, however, have reverted to the interrupted subject of conversation had she not herself recurred to it after dinner.

"That little girl with the quaint name. What was it you were saying about her? I do not care much about little girls, but that one who hid under the altar-cloth must be an original, *n'est ce pas?*"

"I do not think that she is what you call 'an original,'" said Mr. Knight, frowning. "That conveys to me the idea of some one who poses. Jeronime is the simplest and least affected of people. She is as straightforward as a nice, honest lad, though there is a charm about her which—which would be lacking in a boy. I could tell you an anecdote about her when she was nine years old which would illustrate my meaning, but I do not wish to weary you, Madame."

"I shall not be wearied," said Anne, who indeed was listening greedily. Her busy fingers moved quickly, her needle

flew, but not so fast as her thoughts. She had wished and tried to forget, but since that was proved impossible she now wished to hear.

And she heard a great deal! Mr. Knight would, indeed, have been surprised could he have seen how vivid were the pictures called up before her mental vision by his anecdotes about Jeronime. She learnt all about that rascally doctor, who was not fit to breathe the same air as Mr. Knight's dear little lady, and about Miss Merridan's infatuation. Anne remembered Dr. MacIlvert very well indeed. He had played a short but important part in her life's history; but she never read English newspapers, and had known nothing of the scandal which had driven him from England. He had been very prosperous when she had first met him, and he had impressed her as a clever, hard-headed, not unkindly person. He had given her some brutally frank advice, but, on the other hand, had treated her for neuralgic headaches, and charged nothing for so doing.

"You can let either your child or your reputation go," he had said to her when she had hesitated on the verge of a decision. "Don't flatter yourself you can keep both. People don't believe fables about orphaned cousins or mysteriously produced nieces. If you let your reputation go you will not be able to bring the child up as you would wish. I can easily find another spare baby for Miss Merridan, but you will not so easily find such a comfortable and luxurious home for your little one."

"You have no admiration for this Miss Merridan? And the girl, she does not greatly love her? It was not a good choice that the mother made when she gave her child to that woman?" she asked presently.

Monsieur Colomb, who was listening in the background, laughed suddenly and harshly. "The sort of mother who gives away her child, *ma chérie*, does not trouble herself about the character of her choice. She cannot afford to be fastidious."

Anne shrugged her shoulders. She was wonderfully calm, or, at any rate, she believed that she was, which answered the

purpose. She was playing in a tragi-comedy. Some ironical demon was prompting her.

"Oh, as to that, there are so many old maids in England that I make no doubt the mother had answers to her advertisement from at least a dozen of them! She probably chose the richest," said she. "But since you tell me that Miss Merridan has married a rogue, what becomes of 'Nanon Jeronime' now?"

"Ah, that is the question," said Mr. Knight. "And to tell you the truth, Madame, it is a question which has occupied my thoughts greatly. At present her whole obstinate little mind is set on finding Mère Martha." He smiled tenderly. "Oh, she is very obstinate."

Madame's quick eyes noted the smile. It was for the dear fault of some one who was loved. There never is any mistaking the meaning of that.

"I have had a letter from Miss Jeronime this evening," he continued. "She writes me word that she intends to be at St. Malo next Thursday. She does not mention Miss Williams, who is to accompany her to France, but no doubt they have arranged their plans together. She is convinced that she will find that old woman. For my part I fear that she may suffer some disappointment. I also intend to be at St. Malo on Thursday."

Madame Colomb nodded. "It is a charming episode. You must not fail to tell me how the search ends."

Monsieur Colomb grunted.

"You are romantic, Thomas; but you are too old to be romantic!"

Mr. Knight turned to him with dignified surprise. "I? Romantic? No, I assure you I have never had the slightest tendency in that direction since my salad days. At twenty-five I may have been inclined to sentiment. Ah, ha! you remember that affair?"

He chuckled, the amused chuckle of an elderly man over the memory of youthful follies.

Monsieur Colomb shook his forefinger accusingly. *He* was not amused; he saw nothing to chuckle over.

"You were not half so sentimental then, when you were young, and it was the right time for romance, as you are now when you have one foot in the grave, and are grey and old and bloodless."

"But, Félix, you are hardly polite!" said Anne in some dismay. "Mr. Knight is at least twelve years younger than yourself," she added, with that occasional directness of speech which was natural to her, although the training of the world had modified it.

"Ah! I am ridiculous, no doubt. Thomas is a fool, but I am the greater fool," said Monsieur Colomb, his voice suddenly dropping to a depressed mutter.

"Do not take offence. It is the gout in his big toe," said Anne, in an undertone.

Mr. Knight reflected that she must have something to put up with at times. He had intended to have consulted his old friend on an intimate subject, on the advisability of unequal marriages. An oldish man marries a penniless girl. The world sneers, of course, and says that she is mercenary and he a laughing-stock. But a sneer or two matter little if they are happy. Colomb would surely agree with him there? Now he decided not to invite Colomb's opinion. A man with gout in his toe is no fair judge.

"Had I the least symptom of gout about me I should never entertain the idea of asking any young girl to put up with me," said Mr. Knight to himself, as he undressed that night. His trick of talking to himself had grown on him. "It would be preposterous," he added firmly, "quite preposterous!" Fortunately, he had never been gouty.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. KNIGHT walked fast up the narrow streets of the old town of St. Malo. The doctor had told him not to hurry up-hill, and he was suddenly reminded of the injunction by a spasm of pain. An ill-timed, inconvenient indisposition had delayed his arrival by two days, but had he known that Miss Williams had failed Jeronime, no slight illness would have prevented his starting at once to meet her. He slackened his pace perforce, smiling ruefully and shaking his head at himself as he recalled his friend's peevish words.

"One foot in the grave! Grey and old and bloodless! Is that how Jeronime regards me?"

Age certainly had begun to sharpen his finely chisselled features, and the brilliant sun of France showed crows-feet about his eyes. After his long solitude the change and uprooting of the last few weeks had tried him. He told himself wistfully that it was only his body that was growing old, and indeed when body and soul are unequally matched, it is "poor brother ass" who suffers. He was tired by the time he reached the hotel, and he was disconcerted and puzzled when he was told that no Miss Williams was staying there, and that Miss Joy had taken a bedroom but was out at the moment.

"Who is Miss Joy travelling with?" he asked, wondering ruefully whether his memory had played him a trick, and whether the name of Jeronime's companion were Henry, or George, or Roberts, or anything but Williams.

The reply startled him considerably: "Miss Joy came here with Mrs. de Grouchy, Monsieur."

With Mrs. de Grouchy! What extraordinary chain of events could have led to Jeronime's travelling with Mrs. de Grouchy of all people, and was the circumstance fortuitous or arranged? Did Mrs. de Grouchy know who the child was? Was that rather ill-kept secret out? Mr. Knight sent in his card and asked if Mrs. de Grouchy would be so kind as to see him, then waited for her in the blazing hot little *salon* of the hotel, which he and she and myriads of flies had to themselves that August afternoon.

Mr. Knight had heard with real sorrow of De Grouchy's death. In the course of that eventful night when De Grouchy had so successfully played host, the guest had somehow come by the idea that Mrs. de Grouchy was a very hard and unsympathetic wife, a Catholic too! and he had a strong prejudice against the Romish Church. Yet when she came into the room her quiet dignity impressed him at once.

"I am glad to see you," she said, offering him a slender, thin hand. "Miss Joy told me that you were sure to come. I have been awaiting your coming with some eagerness."

It seemed to Thomas Knight that she was enveloped in mourning. Not only in the outward signs of it, though she was of course clothed in black, but in the grief that fenced her round and set her apart from the work-a-day world.

"You are most kind, Madam," he said. "I should not have ventured to intrude on you were it not that I am Miss Joy's oldest friend, and that I have become accustomed to consider myself in some sort her guardian. I knew that she was in St. Malo, but it is news to me that she is travelling with you."

"She is with me by what I should call the merest chance—if I believed that there was such an ill-regulated power as chance," said Emma de Grouchy, with a smile.

Her smile lit up her grey eyes. It was like the momentary lighting of a lamp. Mr. Knight suddenly understood that she did not believe in chance, that she was one of the people who believe in Divine leadings. He felt shy.

"But what has become of Miss Williams?" he asked.

"An attack of jaundice obliged Miss Williams to stay at

home, but Miss Joy could not wait," said Mrs. de Grouchy "I made her acquaintance on board the boat. Seeing that she is so very young and so very ignorant I persuaded her to come with me to this hotel. It was impossible not to feel an interest in her. She told me that she was going to France to search for an old nurse who took care of her before she was adopted by Miss Merridan. I have heard something of Miss Merridan. My husband had some slight acquaintance with her. Her property marches with the Yellow House estate, does it not?"

"Yes, that is so," said Mr. Knight briefly. He seemed to hear again De Grouchy's laugh, and the half-bitter, half-comical tone in which he had cried, "I can't bring my wife here while Anne's brat is sitting on the old maid's lap next door!"

"Miss Joy tells me that she has been treated with every kindness, but that she cannot any longer live on Miss Merridan's generosity. All this does not appear to be my affair, but I find that I cannot leave this girl alone in a French hotel without knowing what is to happen next to her. Since you have come, I hope that I may safely resign her to your charge?"

"You may," said Mr. Knight. "I think I can honestly say that I have Miss Jeronime's interests at heart. I am exceedingly grateful to you for your kindness to her. Miss Merridan has lately seen fit to marry an unmitigated scoundrel. It is perfectly true that Jeronime cannot continue to live with them."

"Have you any idea what she will do?" said Mrs. de Grouchy. She was surprised at her own anxiety on the subject. It was odd how this girl attracted her.

"Yes, I have an idea," said Mr. Knight slowly; "I think that under the circumstances it might be expedient to suggest it to her at the earliest opportunity. Do you know where she is at this moment?"

"The poor old woman she came to seek is dying. She is with her. I will show you whereabouts Mère Marthe's house lies," said Mrs. de Grouchy.

She walked a few steps up the street with him and saw him on the right road, then turned thoughtfully back to the hotel. That strange, unexpected responsibility was shifted to Mr. Knight's shoulders now. Why had she ever troubled herself so much about this stray girl? She almost grudged any care that distracted her from the underlying care for James in purgatory. She murmured prayers for him as she went in out of the blinding sunshine. She did not know yet why it was that she had cared for Jeronime.

Meanwhile Jeronime's oldest friend went gaily on his way. His idea exhilarated him. He meant to scold his little lady for going off to France alone, but it would be a scolding full of sympathy. He climbed up the cobbles of an especially steep old street. It felt cool as a well after the glare by the sea. He stood aside to let a string of donkeys laden with vegetables step past him, planting their hoofs carefully on the rounded, slippery stones—then behind the donkeys he saw Jeronime.

Her face was pale and very serious. She was making for the beach, and her big, soft eyes were fixed on the glimpses of the sea which she caught between the houses.

Mr. Knight stood under a jutting doorway.

"Well, little miss!" he said softly, as she would have passed him.

It was good to see how her face softened into joyful welcome. This time she did not throw her arms round his neck nor shout with joy; no, she stood quite still and looked at him through tears.

"And how is the experiment answering, eh?" said he; "was the old nurse pleased to see you, my dear?"

"Mère Marthe is dead," said Jeronime; "she died this morning in my arms. I am glad I came here. She fancied (just at the last) that I was one of her sons, and that made her quite contented."

The tears overflowed and rolled down her cheeks. She clasped the hand that Mr. Knight had held out fast in both her own.

"Please come with me to the sea. I want to tell you all

about it," she said, "I am rather unhappy. It is a very lucky thing for me that you have come."

They went silently side by side down to the beach. Jeronime wiped away her tears as they walked.

"I was so very glad to see you that the gladness shook them out," she observed apologetically.

When they reached the shore they sat together under a boat, in a long and contented silence.

"Come, little miss, will you not tell me all about it now?" he said at last.

"Oh, it is so *comfortable* to have you again, that there seems no need to talk," said Jeronime; "but I will if you like."

She was in no hurry to begin her story, but Mr. Knight was patient, he had long ago learnt to wait for her confidences.

"Mère Martha hardly knew me," she said sadly. "I don't suppose that really mattered so much, but I was very disappointed because, all my life, I have wanted to find her again."

"I am sorry you were disappointed. I am of opinion that your disappointment does matter," said her loyal old friend.

"Not really," said Jeronime. "Really only the big things matter."

Her eyes dilated. Death had come quite close to her for the first time since she had entered this world, where he walks so close to life. She had seen him resistless as the ocean, a mighty, ever-encroaching power, and the sight had filled her with awe and amazement.

"She wasn't the same Mère Marthe that I remembered," she went on in a low voice. "I suppose I am not the same Jeronime. Nothing lasts, does it, except God? Isn't it strange? He gives life and takes it back just as we draw in and give out breath, does He not? It is like the surge forward and pull back of the waves too. Yes, now I know what the sound of the waves means. It's all one meaning. We fancy little things matter. It is because we are so silly. One laughs at the silliness when one has just seen some one die. *That* was His drawing in breath, and Mère Marthe's soul went, you know. I couldn't have held it, though I had

both my arms tight round her. When He breathes out, all the baby things are born, aren't they? Lambs and birds and buds and children and everything? What a fuss we make! It is happening everywhere always, every minute, and yet I seem never to have known about it till dear old Mère Marthe's life went right away from her poor old body, and only *that* stayed in my arms. Isn't it very stupid of me never to have really thought about death before?"

Her hand in Mr. Knight's was cold; he rubbed it gently between his fingers.

"Why, little miss?" he said gently. "I am sorry that poor old thing is dead, and I am more sorry that you were with her when she died, for I think you have had a bit of a shock and your hands are stone cold and your eyes too bright."

"I am glad I was there," said Jeronime. "I shall always be glad of that."

It was very consoling to nestle close to her dear old friend. She began to thaw, to feel more like herself again. His homely kindness did her good.

"Mrs. de Grouchy is very religious, you know," she said after a pause. "She would be saying prayers for poor old Marthe's soul if she were in my place. Do you know, I met Mrs. de Grouchy on the boat? She is the widow of *your* Mr. de Grouchy, and she has been very kind to me. She thought it was very shocking that I should be travelling alone to France, but I tried to explain to her that I must find Mère Marthe. Yes, I am sure she would be saying prayers if she had any to spare, you know. Of course she really wants all her prayers for some one else."

"How do you know that, my dear? I hope Mrs. de Grouchy is not endeavouring to pervert you?" said Mr. Knight rather anxiously.

"I don't know how I knew. I think I *saw*," said Jeronime. "I can feel that she's always praying for some one. I like her. She cares so much. Still *I* should think God knows what to do without our jogging His elbow. It would be dreadful if we could really interfere. It would make such a muddle, wouldn't it?"

"Prayers for the dead are a Popish invention," said Mr. Knight firmly.

They listened quietly to the rhythm of the waves—this oldish man whose best years lay behind him, and this girl who was but just entering on her womanhood.

"We have to consider what you will do next, Jeronime," he said at last.

It was all very well for her to say that nothing mattered, but to his mind Jeronime's immediate future was of far greater importance than the death of a dozen old nurses.

"Yes, let us consider—after Mère Marthe is buried," said Jeronime.

She turned to him with a wistful gentleness that gave her a new charm in her old lover's eyes.

"I should like only to consider Mère Marthe till the funeral is over, please; afterwards we can think about me. You see, Mr. Knight, I had meant to do so many things for her. I always have hoped to come back and be a surprise and pleasure to her. When that money came to me I thought of all the presents I should buy for her. I suppose it was very childish of me. Now there is nothing left for me to do but to go to her funeral in a black dress. I hope she might like me to do that. It does not seem much, does it? It is only better than nothing at all."

Mr. Knight sympathetically agreed. He was far more patiently sympathetic than a younger man could have been. He had had so much time in which to ponder over Jeronime's character; he had watched it unfold since she was a baby of four; he had noticed the first burgeoning of the buds which were scarcely yet in flower. He demanded little for himself and he trusted her completely.

"If *you* would come with me to Mère Marthe's funeral I believe that that will please her—if she knows about it," said Jeronime shyly. "They think so much about funerals here." She felt she was asking a good deal of her dear Mr. Knight, but asked it with that confidence which was the highest compliment she paid him. "You see, as you and she are my two great friends——"

"Yes, yes," he said quickly. "I will certainly attend the poor old soul's funeral since you would like me to do so. You would do better to remain in your room, my dear. It is not fitting for women to be present at melancholy and harrowing scenes."

"I must go," said Jeronime. "If I knew who and where Maman is I should write to her and beg her to come too. We ought both to be at Mère Marthe's grave."

Mr. Knight shook his head. "I should advise you not to waste thought and emotion on your mother."

"I do think about her, but I loved Mère Marthe better than Maman," said Jeronime.

Her voice shook and she turned her head away. Mr. Knight was astonished at the amount of feeling she displayed, though he had always known that Jeronime's affections were tenacious.

"It is extraordinary that a child of barely four years of age should have had such a strong and lasting love for any one. You were a remarkable child," he said gravely.

"Mère Marthe was such a dear, kind old thing. I *did* love her, didn't I, Mr. Knight?"

"I see you did, Jerry."

"But I don't believe it is all love for her that makes me want to cry," Jeronime added honestly. "Seeing her die startled me, you know. She made such a dreadful sound in her throat, and her poor old hands turned so cold and clutched me so tight. And now—now I can never look forward to finding her any more. There is nothing more to find except Maman, and I am afraid Maman does not want me. Perhaps she is dead too, or quite altered, so that I would not recognise her. Do you know, Mr. Knight, I have always thought it so dreadfully silly and tiresome of godmother to talk so much about being lonely and having no one to love her, but now I begin to see I was rather horrid to her sometimes. She has got that doctor now, and since she has had him she has not wanted anything from me, but if I were back again in the time before he came I should be much nicer to poor godmother. I was so stupid! I never understood how

uncomfortable it feels to be lonely. One understands everything too late!"

Mr. Knight laughed in spite of his sympathy. "Why, Miss Jerry, you mustn't talk as if you were eighty years old!"

"I *have* grown old, you know," said Jeronime solemnly. "All this trouble has aged me so much that I feel I shall never be careless and silly again."

"Well, well!" Mr. Knight refrained from laughing again, but at the bottom of his heart he was aware that "little miss" had years of youth before her, and that the very finality of her present grief was a sign of childishness. She was still baby enough to fancy that the impression made on her must be always present, that the cloud that hid the sun was a final eclipse! Yet none the less her loneliness and the pathos of her pallor and sadness and her grief over the loss of her dreams touched him acutely. His conscience pinched him, but he spoke.

"My dear, you say you are unhappy and lonely—then why not come to me? *I* am lonely; I am very dull without you. The Yellow House is like a tomb now you do not visit it. Will you not come to me?"

Jeronime shook her head. "I said we would not talk about my plans to-day, please, Mr. Knight."

"But I cannot wait any longer," said he. "I think you must try to give me an answer."

"Must I? Then let me think just for a minute," said Jeronime.

She drew a deep breath and gazed out to sea, as if in that mighty expanse of rhythmic, living water good counsel were to be found. She had not wished to be adopted again, yet now it dimly dawned on her that she might have mistaken the values of what life offers. Dependence on a whimsical and exacting woman had made the child greatly desire freedom, but then Death, stepping in unexpectedly, had touched the woman in her and made her suspect that she had raised too much pother about those passing circumstances which his hand can sweep aside in the twinkling of an eye. Her silence

was long. Jeronime could never think rapidly, and her mind was tired with the strain of the morning.

"I don't know," she said appealingly. "I thought that perhaps I might just live here in lodgings for a time (I have still some money left) till I can find some way of earning an honest living."

"Surely you would not be happy to live in lodgings, alone among foreigners?" said Mr. Knight.

He commanded his voice with difficulty. The plan was absolutely preposterous, but a too great eagerness would be his undoing.

"I could have been happy with Merè Marthe," said Jeronime. "I was fond of her. I suppose one does need some one to be fond of? Perhaps that matters more than anything else? I am so puzzled. I wish you would not mind waiting till after the funeral. No! you say you can't wait. I *will* try to get my mind straight."

"I do not wish to distress you," he said, in a low, strained voice.

Jeronime turned to him with the frank smile of her childhood.

"Why, you see, Mr. Knight, it's like *this*—I am not at all so sure that I shall be a success if you adopt me! Now it is so dreadful to eat some one else's food and to live in some one else's house and owe every single thing, and feel all the time that one isn't what is wanted! You don't know what that is! You never have been adopted, have you? It makes one ashamed and cross and ungrateful, and it makes everything taste nasty. But then, on the other hand, we are great friends, you and I, and—and I cannot bear you to be vexed, because I cannot do without my greatest friend. That's just how it is, you see."

"I am not offering to adopt you, Jeronime, although I am unfortunately old enough to be your father," said he; "I am asking you to be my wife, my dear."

"Your—your wife!" repeated Jeronime.

She was considerably startled, so startled that she got no further than that exclamation; and he, gathering courage

pleaded his cause with self-restraint and gentleness. Jeronime listened amazed. Her idea of matrimony were of the vaguest and were entirely unconnected with her dear old friend. Yet as she listened her brow cleared.

"If I were to do *that*, you would really and truly be quite pleased, would you not?" she said at last very earnestly.

Mr. Knight laughed, with an odd, uncertain sound that made her wonder if he too were rather near crying. "I should indeed, my dear," he said.

"Then it wouldn't be all on one side," said Jeronime. "If you were to adopt me (which was what I thought you meant), you would be doing all the giving, but if you married me why then perhaps you'd almost feel as if *I* were giving you something too? I should so like to give you something too."

"Something!" said he; "now God forgive me!"

He covered his face with his hands. Jeronime watched him with wonder.

"My dear, you are very young," he said at last, "and you have no mother, and I am pressing you unfairly. Go and ask some good woman's advice before you answer me. I'll not behave like a swindler! I won't take advantage of you! Yes, yes, go and ask some good woman. Tell her that you are all alone in the world, and that you are beautiful, and that you have next to no money; and that your guardian has married a rogue, and that I—I love you, and that I would make your happiness my first thought now, and that when I die you should have all that I possess. Tell her my name is an honest one—and *that's* something too that I can give you—that I would take good care of you, and——"

"But I won't," said Jeronime. She drew herself up with some dignity. "I don't need to ask any good woman! I am a woman myself! Why, of course you have always loved me, and I have always loved you, dear Mr. Knight, though it does seem rather silly to talk about it."

She took hold of his wrist, and pulled his hand away from his eyes half laughing, "How could I begin a conversation with, 'I am alone in the world, and I am beautiful?'" she cried, and then was penitently dismayed.

Mr. Knight's face was quite white. It wore an expression that little Jeronime could not understand, that both frightened and touched her.

"Oh, you *do* mind!" she cried. "Don't, don't look like that!"

When he tried pathetically to reassure her, she stopped him impulsively.

"I was horrid! I ought not to have laughed about the good woman, though we won't have her interfering with us," she said. "Why, if you really like to have me, what can be better? I don't know why I did not say 'Yes' at once! There is no one else in all the world who is so great a friend to me as you. Dear, dear Mr. Knight, don't look sorry! I will marry you to-morrow if you like, and we will go back to the Yellow House and we will neither of us ever be lonely ever any more. You'll forgive me, won't you? You know I always was very slow! I could not take in the idea just at first. It did surprise me so. But I *do* love you very much indeed, and you never have minded about my being rather stupid, have you? You must not—please—begin to mind now."

"My little love!" said Mr. Knight, and he kissed her very gently.

So it was settled, and no good woman had the chance to interfere.

CHAPTER XVIII

JERONIME and Mrs. de Grouchy sat on the seat outside the hotel after the *table d'hôte* dinner. Emma would have preferred to have retired to her own room, but she did not like to leave Jeronime sitting there alone, and the girl was fascinated by the foreign sights and sounds. It seemed to her as if the curtain had gone up on some wonderful play. Her eyes shone with pleasure. Particoloured life went by—now a band of soldiers singing, now a group of fishermen, now a frightful beggar, displaying the ills that flesh is heir to, after a fashion to make the squeamish shudder.

Presently Jeronime put out her hand and just shyly touched Mrs. de Grouchy's black dress. "I want to tell you something, if you please," she said. "Mr. Knight is going to marry me; he thinks that that will be much the best plan."

Mrs. de Grouchy jumped. Her strange little travelling companion had given her several surprises, but this announcement took her breath away.

"Mr. Knight! That nice old man! But, my child, he is old enough to be your grandfather!" said she.

"Yes, but he does not mind at all about my being so young," said Jeronime calmly, "and I like old men better than young men. They are more polite, I think. Besides, I have aged a great deal in this last month. I feel serious and old now."

Mrs. de Grouchy looked at the round, candid face beside her, and sighed with growing perplexity. Why was she becoming so interested in this child's affairs? Why did she feel as if she were somehow this little sister's keeper?

"I do not wish to meddle," she said. "But I must beg you to consider what you are doing. Should you not, at any rate, write to Miss Merridan before you engage yourself to this—this kind old gentleman?"

"I *have* engaged myself, but I will write to godmother to-night. She will be pleased," said Jeronime. She hesitated a minute, then—"You see, I never did quite suit godmother," she explained. "It was partly because I am the wrong kind of person for her, and partly because I didn't try hard enough to be different, but Mr. Knight likes me just as I am. I don't have to 'try' to please him. It's a great thing to be with some one who likes one just as one is—don't you think so? I daresay godmother would have gone on putting up with me, in spite of my being a disappointment, but there comes a time when one does not want to be put up with any more, and—well! I couldn't live with Dr. MacIlvert."

"But listen, listen! You do not know what you are doing," said Emma.

"Oh yes, of course I will listen," said Jeronime, with the docility of underlying obstinacy.

And she listened, but with ears that did not understand, while Mrs. de Grouchy tried haltingly to put before her the magnitude of the change she was contemplating, the danger of leaps in the dark, the meaning of matrimony. Emma spoke shyly, she hated speaking at all. When she paused Jeronime slid a little, cold hand into hers.

"It is very good of you to mind about what happens to me," she said gratefully. "I wonder why you do?"

"You remind me of some one," said Emma; "but I hope that I should warn any girl of seventeen if I saw her rushing into she knew not what."

"But I know dear Mr. Knight very well! I have known him since I was four years old!" said Jeronime. "I have promised to marry him now, and I always keep my promises."

It seemed that there was no more to be said. Mrs. de Grouchy recognised that Jeronime had made up that very immature mind of hers, and after all who could say with certainty that she was wrong? It is bad that youth should

wed with age, as all unnatural things are bad; but then it is not so easy for pretty, obstinate, inexperienced maidens to earn a living, and the bread of charity is apt to be both bitter and unwholesome!

Mr. Knight would have liked to have married Jeronime the next morning, and to have carried her back to the Yellow House then and there. He was usually a deliberate person, but on this occasion he was in a nervous hurry. He was beset by the idea that he might die before he had made this child his wife, and though he had already had his will drawn up in her favour he was extremely anxious to bestow on her his name as well as his worldly goods. Jeronime herself had never been much troubled about her lack of legitimate surname, but Mr. Knight had a great reverence for respectability, for the decorous and seemly. He thought much about Jeronime as a widow, for of course she would long outlive him.

She met him on the morning after their engagement with perfect frankness and with no trace of embarrassment.

"I have been thinking a great deal," she said, "and the more I think the more I see that it *is* a very good idea that you have found. It would never have come into my head! Dear Mr. Knight, you are so kind to me always. I don't know any one who is quite so kind as you are!"

She was standing on the threshold of the shop that had once been Mère Marthe's; the wind, blowing up the old street, ruffled the waves of silky hair on her forehead, and made her cheeks glow fresh as a rose.

Mr. Knight looked tenderly at her. "But shall you always address me as Mr. Knight," he said.

Jeronime nodded decisively. "*Always.* I could not call you anything else, could I? Why, Mr. Knight, I could never call you 'Thomas,' it would seem so impertinent—though Thomas is a very nice name," she added hastily. "It is the nicest name for a man that I know."

She was more careful than she had been of other people's feelings. Life was ripening Jeronime; the tartness of her childhood was mellowing. Her old lover thought her sweeter

every hour. She yielded to his arrangements for her with absolute trust. He stayed at St. Malo for Mère Marthe's funeral, but she was to be married from the house of Monsieur Colomb.

The Colombs had both written kindly to Mr. Knight, though it had been Madame who had first suggested that they should offer their hospitality to the waif he was so foolishly marrying.

"Your Mr. Thomas Knight is a very absurd person!" she remarked, "but I do not dislike him. In my opinion he is quite un-English. He is even quixotic about this Miss Jeronime Joy. It will amuse me to offer her sage advice, which we may be sure she will never profit by, and to help her to buy a trousseau, for which I suppose Mr. Thomas Knight will pay!"

On the morning of the day on which she was to travel to Paris, Jeronime stayed close to Mrs. de Grouchy, and frankly owned that she was sorry to leave St. Malo.

"I am glad to go with dear Mr. Knight," she said, "but I hate meeting strangers. I wish he did not want to take me to stay with the Colombs. When I think how dreadful it will be I get hot all over!" Then the girlish admiration and affection that she had conceived for this grave, quiet widow found expression. "And I wish you were coming too," she said. "Will you let me see you again some day, please? When I am a married woman I shall seem nearer your age, and perhaps *then* you might almost let me grow into being a friend of yours in time?"

The quaint humility of the plea made Emma de Grouchy smile, but professions of friendship did not trip easily off her tongue.

"If you should be in any trouble. If, for example, you should change your mind about this marriage, and should need support, you may count on me if I can be of use to you," she said; "though one learns, as one gets on in life, that there is only one sure help, and that an invisible one."

"I don't change my mind," said Jeronime. "It would be nicer if you could like to hear from me again without my being

in any trouble. It is rather dull when people only like one because one is in a hole."

"Ah, now I see!" cried Emma. It was a quick, startled cry, for in the twinkling of an eye she had seized the inexplicable resemblance.

In all essential characterics Jeronime was *un*like her father; she was honest where he had been shifty, constant where he had been unfaithful, but yet she bore a fleeting likeness to him. It showed itself in a certain keen appreciation of sight and sound, it flashed out in her intuition of character, it had been present again in that last half-humorous, half-proud remark.

"My dear, stay with me," cried De Grouchy's wife. "Take a few more weeks to consider. I do not want to let you go."

"Well, I am glad you don't!" said Jeronime triumphantly. "Then I may write to you even though I shall be quite happy, for no one, no one in all the world, is so great a friend as Mr. Knight!"

So she parted from Mrs. de Grouchy, who, with some misgivings, saw the train bear her away in the keeping of that "greatest friend" with whom Emma felt more than a little angry. "It's all very well, but he has no business to marry that child!" she said.

She pondered deeply over that strange likeness that had drawn her as a charm to Jeronime before ever she had named or defined it! Her mind went painfully back to something James had said long ago on the night when he was first taken ill. She was beginning to put two and two together, but had not yet made four. As she re-entered the hotel she came face to face with Quentin Mavis. It certainly did not occur to her that he could facilitate the adding up of that "two and two." She would have avoided him if there had been a possibility of avoidance, but there was not, so she greeted him with the gentle politeness that Quentin always found rather alarming. He had often wondered whether Mrs. de Grouchy had experienced any surprise at that legacy which he had nominally received, but for which, in reality, he had been no penny the richer.

"Are you taking a little holiday in Brittany?" she asked.

Quentin had just jumped off his bicycle. He was hot and covered with dust. He nodded cheerfully.

"A cheap excursion started from Southampton last night, so I thought I might as well come. I have never been in France before. It's awfully light and cheerful, isn't it? What a lot of talking these foreign beggars do! The man in the street seems to have no end to say. Are you making a long stay here?"

"No, I leave this evening," said Mrs. de Grouchy. "I had not intended to have stayed more than one night, but I was unexpectedly delayed. By the by, you probably know the young lady who delayed me, for she comes from your part of the world."

"Who is she?" asked Quentin.

When Mrs. de Grouchy told him of Jeronime's adventure into France he reddened under his freckles and sunburn.

"I knew she was here. They told me at the flat that Miss Joy had gone to St. Malo. That was why——"

He broke off short. That was why he had come. A bicycle is not a romantic steed, and tweed travelling suits have not the dignity of armour, but fortunately there are still plenty of knight errants in the world, and how the spirit of chivalry is clad is really very unimportant.

Emma de Grouchy felt sorry, but spoke with characteristic directness.

"Miss Joy and I made friends with each other on board the boat. I have just bid her goodbye. Mr. Knight is taking her to Paris to stay with some old friends of his. She has promised to marry him."

Quentin stood very still for a minute. The light seemed to fade out of his honest eyes. The hand that held the bicycle tightened its grasp.

"That is a wicked shame!" he said at last. "You should have prevented it."

He spoke from out of that Palace of Truth into which we all wander sometimes. Mrs. de Grouchy's surprise brought him back to his senses.

"I am sure I beg your pardon," the poor boy stammered. "I don't know what possessed me to speak like that to you. Your news was—was a bit funny. I wanted to see Miss Joy. I meant to advise her about investing that money from the sale of that china I had."

Then he could have bitten out his silly tongue! He had never meant to have let that cat out of the bag. He saw that she understood.

"Did my husband leave that china to you on the understanding that you should give the money that it fetched to Jeronime Joy? That was a little hard on you, I fear," she said in her low, clear voice.

"No, no, I wasn't talking about him; I—I was talking of something else," said Quentin lamely.

He lied badly. She made no reply, and the next moment he was on his bicycle and flying away down the uneven, dusty road. He carried a sore heart with him. It is hard to be just too late, and to feel a fool at one and the same time.

Emma de Grouchy stood, a black blot in the sunshine, apparently watching Quentin's precipitate flight. The bicycle jolted over stones, and turned a corner with alarming jerkiness, but she did not really see it. She was not thinking about Quentin. For one terrible moment a fire blazed in her heart, and she hated the girl who could look like James but was the child of another woman. Then the blaze died down, and she remembered that this too was one of James's debts. Perhaps she might have paid it! That night, after she had reached her convent at Dinan, where she was staying for a time, she wrote to Jeronime.

"My dear little Travelling Companion,—I once more entreat you to consider well before you marry. Marriage means so much, and you know so little. If there is anything that I can do for you now or at any time I most earnestly beg you to let me do it. I owe you something. I would offer you a home if I thought that such an offer would be of use.

"Your sincere friend,

"Emma de Grouchy."

Jeronime was much puzzled when she read that letter.

"I can't imagine what she means," she said; "but I don't think Mrs. de Grouchy could give me a home even if I wanted one. To be at home means being with some one who likes one very much, not being with some one who is paying what she thinks she owes."

She was affectionately pleased to have Mr. Knight's escort to Paris. The oddly assorted couple were very happy together when they sat opposite each other in the railway carriage.

"One never knows how fond one is of people till one goes away from them," said Jeronime. "Perhaps one will never know how lovely the world is till one has left it. I should not like to die, like Mère Marthe, and go into another world away from you."

"It is more likely to be the other way about," said he, a little sadly. "But you must not allow your mind to dwell so constantly on death, my dear. It is not healthy nor right that *you*, who are in the morning of life, should be always thinking about its close."

"Then you must not think about graves either," said Jeronime, "because of course my thoughts must always keep yours company. That is right, isn't it? I must trot in step with you when we are married. Mrs. de Grouchy said a great deal about husband and wife being one. I want to be a very good wife, you know." She was funnily serious and conscientious about the future. "I shall learn to manage the house (I do hope Mrs. Lovesaye won't be angry), and I shall look after the dairy. Of course, I may superintend the garden, but may I still dig in it? or will it not be right for a married lady to dig?"

"You may do just exactly what pleases you best, my darling," said he.

Jeronime blushed, for no one had ever called her "darling" before.

"That sounds rather spoiling, doesn't it?" she said doubtfully. "Godmother always said that you spoilt me."

"For the rest of his life, Jerry, this old knight of yours,

means, God helping him, to do his best to make you happy and to keep you as untroubled as the flowers in his garden."

"Mr. Knight," she asked suddenly, "when you were young did you ever fall in love with some one?"

He smiled, the remembrance of the elegant lady who had been the heroine of his youthful day-dreams amused him. There were no deeply stained pages in Mr. Knight's record. The recording angel—or the little girl opposite to him—might read it without much fear.

"Indeed I did, little miss," said he. "There was a beautiful young creature who broke my heart when I was young. I believe that she liked me too (I was not a bad-looking chap when I was twenty-five), but she liked other things better. I was not rich in those days, and her social position was a notch above mine. Dear me! what a ridiculous fool I was about her! But I got over it—of course I got over it! And it was a good lesson for me. I have never been a misanthrope, but after that experience I took care not to burn my fingers. One may trust a woman just so far as one can see her! That's a good, safe rule to go by. It has been mine."

"But you would trust me," said Jeronime, confidently.

She was not the least impressed by the motto. Her clear, childish eyes had long ago pierced to Mr. Kight's sound heart.

"Oh, you—well, yes! But there's only one 'little miss' in the world!"

"I believe *I* have got the best of it," said Jeronime. "Falling in love is very silly. I don't believe you really liked the beautiful young creature half nor a quarter as much as you like me!"

Her old knight eyed her with rather a queer smile.

"Well, well, to tell the truth I don't believe I did," he said. "It's a topsy-turvy world, my dear. I'd give a good deal to be young in it again for your sake."

They were flying through flat, green country. Jeronime's long-sighted eyes rejoiced in the wide expanse.

"It's so refreshing to see far away!" she cried. "I hate a town—it's so dull!"

Mr. Knight put on his glasses, but soon tired of the landscape. He liked better to look at Jeronime.

Was he doing her a wrong? Ought he to stand aside that some younger man might teach her what love was?

"But there *is* no young man who would care for her as I do. He would worship her beauty, perhaps, the young idiot! But I worship her beautiful soul, that I've watched growing, and that is hardly yet self-conscious. She is more thoughtful than she used to be. Is she regretting her promise already?" he asked himself.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said aloud.

Jeronime promptly stretched out her hand. "I was thinking about Dr. MacIlvert and how much I dislike him. I can't understand how godmother can be so fond of him. People when they fall in love lose all the sense they ever had. It must be much better to have a nice, steady, quiet feeling like I have for you and you have for me. It *is* much better, isn't it, Mr. Knight?"

"Without doubt, and without any undue conceit, my dear," said Mr. Knight, "I think that I may affirm that our affection is worth a good deal more than any emotion that Dr. Wallace MacIlvert has bestowed on any one in all his extremely unedifying career."

"He *is* a horror!" said Jeronime, and so they disposed of that subject very comfortably; for, indeed, it is always more comfortable to see black black, and white white.

Jeronime became very silent when they reached Paris. She did nothing by halves, and having made up her mind to marry her "dearest old friend," was also determined to be guided by him; but her heart sank lower with every turn of the wheel of the *fiacre* that brought her nearer to the Colombs' house.

Mr. Knight surveyed her with pleased pride as they stood together on the doorstep. She wore a black skirt out of respect to Mère Marthe, and a black ribband round the collar of her white blouse. Her broad-brimmed black hat suited her. Her fresh beauty was at its best in a grave setting.

"Am I tidy?" whispered Jeronime anxiously, as they mounted the stairs. She had been apt to be indifferent to

what strangers thought of her, but on this occasion she wished to make a good impression.

"I want to look as nice as I *can*," she explained anxiously, "because your friends must say you ought to have married some one older and grander; and I should not like them to think you had been very silly, you know. I wish, I do wish I were taller!"

Mr. Knight laughed.

"You are the right height for me, little miss. You stand '*just as high as my heart*,'" said he. He was pleased with the quotation, and repeated it several times on the way to the drawing-room.

Monsieur and Madame Colomb were awaiting them with some curiosity. Mr. Knight introduced Jeronime with an old-fashioned flourish.

"This, Madame, is the young lady who has done me the honour to promise to become my wife."

She certainly was absurdly young, old Colomb thought, as he glanced not unkindly at her from under his shaggy, twitching eyebrows.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," said Anne.

She held out her hand, but the girl started at the sound of her voice, and stared at her without touching it.

For a second Jeronime turned dizzy with the overwhelming rush of memories. The surge of the sea sounded in her ears. Once she had sat on this woman's lap! She lifted appealing, swimming eyes to Madame Colomb's face. Her lips just formed a whispered "Maman."

"We shall do much shopping together," Anne remarked briskly. "You will consult me about the *trousseau*, will you not? Ah! but I like to be consulted. Also I am clever about clothes. I have counted on your visit, and so has Monsieur Colomb."

"But what—what did she say?" stammered Monsieur Colomb.

He was usually very deaf, much deafer than Mr. Knight, whose ears had not caught that soft, surprised exclamation. He could not surely have heard! But who could have

imagined that the child would remember—that stupid little child whose hands still tugged at Anne's heart-strings and almost upset her calculations.

"What did you say just now, Mademoiselle?" persisted old Colomb.

"I meant to say thank you," said Jeronime. "It is kind of you and of Madame Colomb to invite me to stay. It won't be for very long, because Mr. Knight is going to marry me very soon, you know."

The unabashed simplicity with which she spoke of marriage quite took Monsieur Colomb aback. Anne breathed freely, with a sense of triumph over great danger. Jeronime remembered, but she was loyal.

"You will be ready for your tea. All the English will rather do without their lunch than their tea at five o'clock," said Anne.

Jeronime watched her walk across the room with fascinated gaze. She was so intent on looking at Anne that she spilt the contents of her tea-cup down her dress. Mr. Knight was disturbed by the incident, but Madame Colomb laughed gaily and mopped up the stream.

"Ah! never mind. What does it matter about the little black skirt? To-morrow we go to choose many pretty things, do we not? You and I!"

When she laughed Jeronime's eyes opened wider still, and she trembled all over. She recognised Maman's laugh, but this time she did not exclaim.

After they had finished their coffee Madame Colomb took Jeronime upstairs. The sun was streaming into a pleasant, dainty bedroom. The floor was polished till one could see one's face in it. There was a gay drugget, striped with blue and white, and a table draped with spotlessly clean muslin, and white chairs, and a blue and white window-box full of flowers. Everything that bore the mark of Madame Colomb's hand was fresh and neat, and showed a certain exquisite finish —the sign of the thoroughness with which she did all things.

Jeronime glanced vaguely at the pretty chamber, then her eyes returned to Madame Colomb's face. That puzzled her,

partly because it had changed more than the voice, and partly because the girl's sight-memory was not so absolutely sure as her memory for sound.

"But you *are* Maman," she said. "When you speak I know it."

"I fear that I cannot understand what you mean, Mademoiselle," said Anne. Her eyes seemed to narrow and her expression to harden.

"Oh!" said Jeronime. She stood in the middle of the room, staring almost stupidly at Anne.

"But I know," she repeated. "I never expected to find you here! I never could have guessed you would be here, but now I am not dreaming. Why do you say you are not Maman when you speak in Maman's voice? I suppose it is because you do not want me; but—but *I* can't be some one else."

The comedy seemed likely to prolong itself indefinitely. Anne shrugged her shoulders.

"While you are here, I hope at least to play the part of mother to you," she said at last. There Prudence spoke, but natural feeling peeped through the eyeholes of Prudence's mask. Anne was very eager to play that part.

But Jeronime turned away from her. "I shouldn't have told any one anything you did not want me to tell. I was so startled at first. That was why I said 'Maman.' No one heard but you. You might have trusted me, Maman."

It was hopeless to deny any more. Anne opened her lips to speak, but felt a strange sense of futility, and left the matter there. She had not compromised herself, but all at once she felt that if she stayed any longer in the room she should give herself away. She should say something quite ridiculous. Jeronime was almost too strong for her. She went out abruptly, and as she shut the door sharply behind her there rose up in her a poignant memory of a day long ago, when at the last moment she had all but changed her mind. The memory had such life and vigour that it seemed to sweep time away.

"What is done, is done," said Anne; "but it was not worth while—I reckoned wrong."

CHAPTER XIX

DR. and Mrs. MacIlvert spent their honeymoon in the most luxurious hotels in the most sunny and delightful places that he could find. The bad time which the doctor had been through gave added point to his always keen appreciation of creature comforts. Those past needs were to him as bitters before a meal. He did not forget what he had suffered; he would never forget if he lived to be a hundred.

Lucilla was surprised at the intensity of her husband's enjoyment. She was fitfully and ecstatically happy herself, but in quite a different way and for quite other reasons. She had never had to do without any material luxury. Well-cooked food, easy chairs, and purse always full as the purse of Fortunatus—these had been the adjuncts of her life ever since she could remember. She would not have shrunk from a touch of hardship for a change. She was ready to be as adventurous as a girl. She more than once expressed a desire to go off the beaten track, to stay awhile at some rough little country inn, to get away from tourists and *table d'hôte* dinners, to dispense with the ease that she had had plenty of. The doctor laughed good-naturedly at her aspirations.

"No, no," he would say, "there's really no fun in discomfort! Take my word for that, Lucy. I've tried, and I know."

One day she re-started the subject (which was becoming a trifle vexed) as they sat eating a late breakfast at a small table in a garden that overlooked the lake of Geneva.

"I want to go up to the Pont-du-Loup, Wallace. It would be charming to see the sunrise from that hill. We might put up with a scarcity of meat this hot weather. *I* don't mind what we have to eat."

"But I do, my dear lady," he said. "Well, well," as her face fell, "try it, by all means, if you like. Toil up that steep ascent, which doesn't, I assure you, lead to heaven. Sleep (if you can) with a bedful of fleas! Live on milk and eggs, varied by a tough hen if you're lucky. I daresay the diet will do you no harm. When you've had your fill of it, come down to me again. I don't object to your climbing mountains so long as I stay at the bottom."

"But I want you to come with me," she persisted in some perplexity. The people who had lived or travelled with her had always had to follow her lead before, because she held the purse-strings.

"Oh, but I know better! I like these quarters," he responded cheerfully.

He helped himself to more honey, and emptied the contents of the cream-jug into his coffee with a satisfaction which jarred on his wife's nerves. She loved this man (odd as it may appear), but she loved her own way too, and she had had it for years.

"It is very strange that you should refuse to do what I wish, Wallace," she said.

Her voice shook, because, in spite of his good temper, she was, and always had been, slightly in awe of her doctor. She had often complained of being misunderstood, but he occasionally understood her almost too well—better, in fact, than she understood herself. He could speak with such appalling frankness when he chose to, and he had more than once torn away the graceful illusions with which she had draped her own estimate of herself.

"But why strange?" said he.

"Why?" cried Lucilla in dismay. "*Why?* The question answers itself! Did you not promise that you would do everything to make me happy?"

"Some more of that excellent trout, please," said the doctor. "You are not eating your own breakfast, my dear. That's a great pity. It's the best meal in the day. What were you saying just now? That I promised to make you happy? So I did. Haven't you been happier during these last two

months than ever you were in all your life before? Come now, Lucy, where's the truth? Out with it!"

Lucilla blushed in spite of her years. "I don't say that I have not, but——"

"You *have*," said the doctor calmly. "There would be no use in your saying anything to the contrary, for I should not believe it. The adopted child who didn't love you, the toadies who got all they could out of you, the undiscovered geniuses whom you patronised till their small flames ended in smoke—they all left you miserable and discontented! *I've* given you two months of happiness, and let me tell you that's not so bad when it's a case of a woman of your naturally—sensitive disposition."

"Two months! But it isn't over!" said Lucilla.

Dr. MacIlvert laughed his jolly, hearty laugh. "No, no; we'll hope not. But it will be over—for you—if you worry yourself because I don't dance attendance on all your vagaries. I'm not a tyrant, my dear! I don't in the least wish to coerce you. Go to the moon if you like, only don't expect me to come too."

"But I can't enjoy the moon without you," she said.

"No? Well, I daresay it is possible you can't," said the doctor coolly.

He unfolded the English newspaper which had just come, with an air of having exhausted all that was to be said on that subject; then he relented, for Lucilla was in tears, and in his own way he was really rather fond of her.

"I'll give you a bit of advice," said he, with a twinkle in his eyes. "And mind you, Lucy, at any rate you've got *this* advantage in marrying me—you no longer have to pay guineas for my advice! When you stand between two bunches of hay, choose the best of 'em, but don't be squinting at the other while you're munching. That spoils the flavour. If you want to have your own way and play at independence for a week, go! *I* shan't blame you. There's no accounting for tastes. If you'd rather stay among the fleshpots with me, stay, and I'll take all the care of you I can. But don't go up a dismal mountain alone in order to be wretched because

you are free, and don't stay with me and hanker after freedom."

"But before we married——" began Lucilla.

"It's after we've married now, and we've had enough of this," said the doctor, yawning. "Don't let's bore each other, my love. If you are going up to the Pont-du-Loup I'll order a mule and a guide for you as soon as I've finished the *Times*. Mind you take warm wraps."

"I think I'll stay," said Lucilla waveringly.

There was not, and there never had been much chance for her in any conflict of wills between herself and this man. They were unequally matched, and she was in love with him, which would have been a heavy handicap, even supposing the advantage had been otherwise reversed. She left her untasted breakfast and wandered away by herself to another part of the garden.

Presently she sat on a seat in an arbour that was wreathed in roses. The pink and crimson petals, the emerald green leaves shone, living, translucent colour, in the vivid Southern light. Beyond the roses the blue sea shimmered, light-flecked too. The poor lady's eyes ached with so much brilliancy. They were accustomed to the haze of London, or the tenderer blues and greens of the north of England. Her husband had recommended her to wear goggles, but she could not bear to put on anything that was unbecoming when she was with him. She clung fast to the belief that he adored her. She felt giddy when she suspected him of base motives. Poor Lucilla knew that she had been such a sad fool in the opinion of every one of her friends and acquaintances, that she could not afford to gratify their strictures. Her marriage *must* turn out a triumphant success.

Presently a waiter brought a letter to her; it was from Jeronime—from the child over whose coldness she had once declared that she was nearly heart-broken. She was ashamed to own to herself how comparatively small a matter Jeronime's feeling, or lack of feeling, had since become.

The letter was long, surprisingly long:—

"My dear Godmother,—I am going to be married to Mr. Knight. I think that you will be very much astonished to read this, but you cannot be so astonished as I was, for I never thought of such a thing, nor had the least idea that he could wish it, until he asked me, and even then I did not understand at first.

"It seems very strange that any one like Mr. Knight should want to marry me. I am sure that you will hardly be able to believe it, but it is quite true. Mr. Knight really wants me very much.

"After you left England I heard that Miss Williams was ill with jaundice, and could not travel with me as we had arranged. But I could not give up going to look for Mère Marthe. I took some of the money that was left to me, and went straight to St. Malo. Mrs. de Grouchy says that this was very wrong of me, but I have always wanted to find Mère Marthe so much that I felt as if I could not help going. I met Mrs. de Grouchy on board the steamer. She is a Roman Catholic, but very good. I have dinner at her table, and every one at the hotel thinks that I belong to her party. Mère Marthe is dead. I found her, but she died after I got here.

"Mr. Knight came to St. Malo just after she died, and he asked me to marry him the same day that he arrived. It is very good of him. I know quite well how stupid and young and unfit I am, but he says that he does not in the least mind; and as he has known me all my life, and has always been my greatest friend, I suppose that he knows what he is about and has made up his mind to it. I am very grateful to him. I shall like living with him at the Yellow House very much. He says that we had better be married soon, so that he can take me back with him.

"Since you left, and since Mère Marthe died, and since I have promised to marry Mr. Knight, I have thought about a great many things I never thought about before. I see how stupid and tiresome I have often been. Mr. Knight thinks I am rather a good, nice kind of person, and that has made me understand how horrid I usually was. If you will be so kind

as to please forgive me I shall be very glad, and I shall try to be really good in the future. Of course that will not make any difference to you now, because since you have got Dr. MacIlvert you have not worried about me any more; but I want to say I am sorry.

"I hope you will be pleased at my marrying Mr. Knight. I am to stay with some friends of his in Paris and be married in an English church there. He says this is the best thing to do, and I shall of course always do what he says now; but I should like to have your consent, and I wish you could be with me on the wedding-day, but I should not like Dr. MacIlvert to be there, so there is no use in wishing that.

"I have taken a long time to write all this, and in the end I have not said what I want to say.

"Please, godmother, do not feel angry and disappointed about me now. I am sorry I have been horrid. I am glad to marry dear Mr. Knight, because he is so kind and good; but sometimes I feel afraid of the newness of it. I should like it if you could think kindly of me on the day. I will let you know the date.

"I am writing from the hotel at St. Malo, and I go to Paris with Mr. Knight to-morrow.

"Your affectionate godchild,

"JERONIME JOY."

Surprise was hardly a strong enough word for what Lucilla felt. She was stupified, amazed, indignant! Her husband, coming lazily in search of her, strolled into the harbour and took the letter out of her hand. She murmured a faint protest. "But what's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine, my dear," said he, and the last part of his sentence was undoubtedly true.

The remarks about himself amused him, and he laughed as he gave back the letter.

"I wish poor old Knight joy of that young woman," said he. "No fool like an old fool, eh?"

"But it's impossible! I shall not allow Joy to marry him," cried Lucilla. "She is a baby yet. Why, her letter is the

letter or a mere child! What can she know of love and marriage? It is preposterous and wicked of him to have proposed to her!"

"It's a remarkably good thing for *her*," said the doctor. "A penniless, nameless girl, living on your charity! It's one chance in a hundred that she's got!"

"I never considered that what I gave her was charity," said Lucilla warmly. "She was like my own child! And it must surely be a *bad* thing for her, with her warm heart and her innocence and her prettiness, to be tied to a man of that age. Money is not everything. Indeed it has never weighed at all with me."

"Oh, come, come!" said the doctor.

Without doubt it had been fortunate for him that Lucilla had always inclined to the romantic view of a situation, but just now he was slightly irritated by her high-flown notions. Perhaps at the bottom of his heart he grudged Jeronime her luck. He had not forgotten how she had nearly been the undoing of him.

"You didn't find Miss Joy's heart so very warm once! I seem to remember a good many complaints of its coldness," said he. "As for her innocence, it strikes me that she knows perfectly well how to take care of number one. Pretty? She's more than pretty, my dear; she'll be beautiful in a year or two! But she couldn't do much better than this, you know. How old is Knight? Nearing sixty, I suppose? Well, that's better for her than if he were ten years younger."

"Why?" said Lucilla.

"In another ten years she'll be just in her prime," said Dr. MacIlvert thoughtfully, "and she will be enormously wealthy, and she'll be free. That chap hasn't a long life before him, or I am much mistaken. It's a good move! Really an uncommonly good move on her part."

"How can you?" cried Lucilla angrily. "You take such coarse views of everything, Wallace! Poor little Joy! You make me shudder."

She did literally shudder, but she was not thinking of Jeronime's probable widowhood, but of herself and Dr. Mac-

Ilvert. Had he calculated when they married that in so many years he might be "enormously wealthy" and he might be "free"? Such ideas, like horrible and wicked faces, sometimes peered at her from among the late roses of the honeymoon.

"Coarse, am I? Yes, but the world *is* coarse," said he, with unabashed good temper. "It is not fashioned out of moonshine. Its dirt is built up of births and deaths (which are not altogether pretty facts), and it goes round to the tune of a jolly good fight and the devil take the hindmost! So Miss Joy has got her footing! I gave her the first hoist up, but she hasn't thanked me for it! She did her best to upset my plans, but luckily you liked me best and I won the trick, eh, Lucy?"

He put his arm round her and pulled her close to him. He was by no means devoid of affection, and he liked women. Moreover, he did not wish to quarrel with Lucilla. He was too old, and had had too much fighting in his life to enjoy squabbling as a pastime.

"Eh, Lucy?" he repeated.

"I never doubted you," said Lucilla. When his arm was round her she feared the horrible faces less.

"No, that is not it, my dear—but you liked me best," he said. "You had a few doubts! Oh, I saw them! but you preferred the man you were in love with to a slip of a girl who was often more trouble than she was worth! That was natural enough. I knew I had Nature on my side, and let me tell you she's the best of helpers. Catch fast hold of her. That's the one golden rule. Take her hand and you'll find her stronger than convention, or habit, or what people call conscience. Go against her, and you'll pay for it—in a ditch."

"But when you say these things you make me miserable!" cried Lucilla passionately.

Sometimes it seemed to her that he tore off every shred of self-respect that she possessed. She had been so enveloped in pretty garments—had really posed to herself as such a very high-minded and charming lady! She was bewildered and

shocked at this odd, new appearance of herself, divested of floating draperies, seen in the unpoetic light of his dry common sense. He was very clever, but he did not always know how much he depressed Lucilla.

"No, no," he said, tightening his arm. "I don't want to do that."

"But what you have just said sounds as if you had no respect for me, as if you fancied that I paid no attention to what Jeronime said against you just because I was in love with you."

"And wasn't that the fact?" said he cheerfully. "On my soul, Lucy, I think it was a very respectable motive for ignoring anything to my discredit! A motive old as Adam and Eve."

"I don't," said Lucilla.

She longed to ask him if he had really played her a trick, if he had put that brooch in Jeronime's box, but she forbore, because, though she longed to know, she feared the answer. Wallace was not at all afraid of her. He would reply with shameless frankness supposing—but no! she would not suspect him.

"Have you any respect for *any one*, Wallace?" she said at last.

"Good gracious, yes!" said he. "I hope I'm not abnormal! I can respect good work when I see it. There's a fellow who has just started a new theory about epilepsy. His articles in the *Lancet* have been worth considering, I can tell you. He'll go far, I believe. He's on the right tack."

"But morally," she persisted. "I know that you respect brains."

"Morally? Well, morals are a question of sound constitution and environment. I can admire a morally sound man as I can a physically sound man. Mind you, Lucy, it pays to be what people call good, so long as you are not too good. Virtue, like everything else, should be kept within reasonable limits. Don't look unhappy! I'm sure you're quite good enough for me, my dear; if you had been *too* good I shouldn't have had much chance, eh?"

Lucilla re-read Jeronime's letter. "She is a good, honest child! Perhaps, after all, it's as well that she is leaving us. Mr. Knight will take better care of her than I did."

"Poor old fool!" said the doctor again; "but I'll allow she's lovely enough to tempt Methuselah! It's funny enough that she should have turned up her nice little nose at me, and gone out of her way to be rude to me, when one considers how I picked her up!"

"You don't like her," said Lucilla. "Wallace, did you——? No, never mind."

"Did I what?" said he. "You are in a questioning mood to-day, Lucy. I don't know that you are wise! You should be careful how you knock at closed doors lest the devil open to you. That is, you should be careful if you're nervous, and if you believe in the old gentleman. Why, what's the matter now?"

"Nothing—except that your jokes are rather grim," said Lucilla, trying to smile. "That's because you are Scotch."

She turned from the closed door; she had not quite courage enough to knock again. "But I must see Joy before she marries," she said. "We must go at once to Paris. You see, she wants me; she writes, 'I wish you could be with me.' She is more affectionate than I imagined. She evidently longs for me. I *must* go."

"Very well! I don't mind," said he, after a moment's pause. He would not follow Lucilla's vagaries when they led her up mountains and entailed bad cooking, but he liked Paris, and he did not wish to cross her whims when he lost nothing by humouring them.

"Let's go and give that prescription of mine to poor old Knight. I hope it will agree with him!"

CHAPTER XX

JERONIME was unhappy.

Her old knight, watching her with the careful tenderness that characterised his affection for his ridiculously young *fiancée*, saw the shadow of troubled perplexity in her eyes, and wondered again if she were regretting. Once he asked her if she wished him to set her free, and her answer startled him.

"You can't do that! I never was free! No one is free, I believe!"

Something interrupted their conversation, and he could not elucidate her meaning.

Poor Jeronime! He little knew how she felt bound and galled by invisible chains which hurt her honest soul. When she sat, silent and grave, by Madame Colomb's side in the carriage, she was not troubled about her approaching marriage, but about the deception that was being practised on Monsieur Colomb and of the reasons why Maman disowned her.

She showed no eagerness to converse again on the subject. Her tongue was unready, and she was proud. Yet Madame Colomb knew that Jeronime did not acquiesce in the lie, but was full of mute protest, and a mute protest can be very strong! The position was odd, at times almost unbearably overstrained. The girl asked no intimate questions, neither would she answer any; she entrenched herself behind an impenetrable reserve.

Day by day Anne grew more desirous of knowing this strange little daughter, but no one could know Jeronime against her will. When they were alone together the girl

became almost as monosyllabic in her replies as she had been in her childhood. Only once, when Anne tentatively ventured on a question about Mère Marthe, Jeronime said gravely—

"You should have been at her funeral too, Maman."

In order to be consistent Anne felt that she should protest against the "Maman," but somehow she could hardly bring herself to do so.

"You are an obstinate little thing, dear Mademoiselle Joy," said she, "but it is really too hot to contend against your fancies to-day; and see, I have no child left—it almost pleases me to hear you call me 'Maman.' It is absurd, of course, and you must never speak so to me before Monsieur Colomb. You understand that?"

"Yes," said Jeronime.

"But when we are quite alone together there can be no harm in it. If we like to pretend, you and I——"

"I do not pretend," said Jeronime.

Madame Colomb turned away impatiently. She wanted to make the most of this strange three weeks. If Jeronime had been amenable it could have been so easily managed. The flimsy pretence might have worn transparent between them, and yet might have rendered the situation quite safe. "We are playing at being mother and daughter," she would have declared. What could be kinder or prettier than to play mother to this motherless girl? She could have played it so very heartily, and, to her own surprise, she hankered after the *rôle*. But no! Jeronime would have none of that. She refused tacitly to respond. Whatever she might have been to an acknowledged mother, she deeply resented the assumption of a spurious motherhood, and there was no getting round her. She might be unlike Anne in many ways, but she was like her in that she had a decided will of her own.

So Anne's craving to learn more of the history of the child whom she had deliberately renounced remained unsatisfied except so far as Mr. Knight could be led to reveal passages from Jeronime's simple and uneventful past. Mr. Knight found Madame Colomb charming in these days! She was a

really eager and interested listener when he spoke on the subject that lay nearest his heart. Yet he too was perplexed and baffled. Something was surely amiss with his little lady.

One day he said wistfully to Anne, "I suppose that no elderly man can always understand a girl of seventeen, however much he may endeavour to make her welfare and the satisfaction of her wishes the aim of his life. You, Madame, who were once a girl yourself, must doubtless possess much knowledge that an old bachelor cannot attain to. Do you feel convinced that Jeronime is as happy and free from misgiving as I should wish her to be? Do you ever suspect that I am hurrying her unduly? I would not for the world press or trouble her, and yet I am very anxious to make her my wife. No doubt she talks to you about many things, and without words you would understand."

"Not at all!" said Anne sharply. "I assure you that there is a wider gulf between a woman of my age and seventeen than there is between you and Jeronime. Miss Joy is no talker. She does not confide in me. But if you want my opinion, I say 'Do not wait.' That girl is too pretty to be allowed to stray alone through the world."

He was not quite satisfied, but he tried to put aside his uneasiness. He had come prepared to take Jeronime out. He enjoyed being her Cicerone. They were (as they had ever been) excellent companions. They poked about Paris together, confiding to each other their equally naïve impressions. The element of pathos that must always be in a close friendship between youth and age seemed to throw a tenderer glamour over their intercourse.

"I could not talk to any young man as I talk to you," Jeronime would say. "Young men are stupid and selfish. You have so much experience and understanding; you are always interested, and know what I mean to say however badly I express myself."

He smiled a little sadly, reflecting perhaps that it was not altogether his many years that had given him interest and understanding.

On this especial day, however, Jeronime was preoccupied

and grave, and they became sadder and sadder as they wandered through the Cluny Museum, an almost comically silent couple.

"See that handsome English father and daughter. How they bore each other! How absolutely dull and unintelligent they are!" a sprightly Frenchwoman whispered to her companion.

"You do not care about the Cluny," Mr. Knight said with a sigh. "It is too old and grave for you."

"It's not that. It is that I keep thinking about something else," said Jeronime honestly. "Sometimes one can't be interested in old things belonging to the past, because what happens *now* is pressing so hard on one's mind."

"Old things belonging to the past! Like myself! like myself!" he muttered.

Jeronime laid her hand on his arm. "Oh!" she cried. "There is godmother!"

She stood still, turning very red. Mrs. MacIlvert had just entered the room Mr. Knight and Jeronime were in. When she saw them she moved quickly towards them, holding out both her hands.

"Joy—my Joy!" she cried. Jeronime, who hated a scene, was very shy. She shook hands, and evaded a kiss, but she was moved too.

"Oh, godmother—so you've come," she said. "I hope you are not vexed because I am going to be married? *You* married, you see, and Mr. Knight is ever so much nicer than —I mean Mr. Knight is so very nice, you know. Godmother, it *is* good of you to have come."

"When I got your letter, Joy," said Mrs. MacIlvert, "I had only one thought. 'She is *my* child,' I said to my dear husband. 'I know that she is longing for me! I must go to Paris!' I did not stop to write! I simply came. I went to the address of Madame Colomb, but I was told that you were out. The servant at the door said that she believed that you had gone to the Cluny with Mr. Knight. I would not wait! I did not even ask to see the lady who is you hostess, though I feel that there would be sympathy between us, for has she

not been kind to you? 'No; Joy wants me! I shall follow her at once,' I said."

Mr. Knight, listening stiffly to this effusion, wondered what the dear husband had said. He was still angry with Mrs. MacIlvert. He could never forgive her because she had refused to sift that affair of the brooch and had apparently taken the doctor's word against Jeronime's. She was a dupe at the best; but as to Dr. MacIlvert, Jeronime should not so much as touch him with a pair of tongs.

"We are much obliged to you," he said. "Miss Jeronime is *my* Joy now."

Then he moved away a few paces, turning his back on the women. He would leave Mrs. MacIlvert with Jeronime for five minutes, but no longer. He pulled out his old-fashioned repeater and watched the minute hand. It crept slowly! People glanced inquisitively at him as he stood watch in hand; they fancied him a trifle mad, perhaps. At the end of the five minutes Mrs. MacIlvert refused to be parted from Jeronime, so they all three walked to the hotel at which she and the doctor were staying. Mr. Knight prevented Jeronime from entering.

"I'll come to see you instead, dear one," said Lucilla.

It seemed that neither was she so very anxious that Jeronime and her husband should meet.

"Will you?" said Jeronime, blankly. Her voice sounded dismayed.

She was more thoughtful than ever as they walked from the hotel to Monsieur Colomb's house.

"Had you not better tell me what it is that is troubling you?" Mr. Knight said at last.

"It is a very troublesome world," Jeronime replied solemnly. "When I was a little girl I did not understand how troublesome, but now that I am grown up difficulties jostle each other in it!"

"But you always used to tell me your difficulties, my dear," he said rather pathetically.

Jeronime nodded. "Yes! and now I can't. I hate having secrets so! But that is another horrid part of growing up

One gets to know things that one must not talk about," she sighed heavily. "I think it's a bad business to be a woman!"

She stood on the step of Monsieur Colomb's house and looked past Mr. Knight up the gay Paris street. Her face was sadly perplexed, but she was not thinking of herself, or of her old lover, but of "Maman," whose life was a lie, and of "godmother" who had married a cheat. Dimly and vaguely she was oppressed also by what she had seen written on the faces of other women in the Paris streets. Hard, keen little faces; sallow, bitter faces—faces with sharp lines and shifty eyes. Her thoughts were sombre and foggy, and she drew a deep breath.

"How I do hate a town!" she said. "I shall be glad when we are out of Paris."

"I am sorry that you have not enjoyed your stay here," said Mr. Knight. He did not offer to come in with her (he had been staying at an hotel since his return), but left her without another word.

Now Jeronime was truly and faithfully fond of her old comrade, and she reproached herself. She was often stupid in small matters, apt to overlook what was under her nose, though on the other hand she could occasionally see through stone walls that baffled other people.

When she was half-way upstairs the belief that she had unwittingly depressed Mr. Knight so weighed on her that she turned round and ran down, and out into the street again, meaning to follow him and to make the crooked straight. She just caught sight of his familiar figure as he turned a corner, then she was delayed at a crossing and nearly run over by a motor-car, and by the time she reached the end of the street he was out of sight. She paused in her chase, discomfited and hot. She was disinclined to return to the house. She had stopped by the open door of a church; she could just hear the droning sound of a chant rise and fall like the solemn undercurrent of life. She pushed through the swinging door, and in the twinkling of an eye was in the cool, grave atmosphere inside.

A mass was going on in front of the high altar. Jeronime

sat on a wooden chair in a side chapel and listened dreamily. People came in and out, but the droning sound went on all the time. So one's thoughts come and go—some good, some, alas! bad and ill-favoured, some merry, some trivial, some slow and dull and halting and sad; but all the while, in the innermost court of all, one's soul sits, and below and beneath the rush of all these passing visitors she hears always a continuous sound, the tune that her life is set to.

Jeronime sat very still. She was glad to be uncompanioned. She was a person who liked and needed long spaces of quiet and silence. She stayed in the church a long while reflecting, and sometimes praying. She was apt to lose count of time, and she shut her eyes to pray. When she opened them again she saw an old man kneeling just in front of her, and presently recognised that it was Monsieur Colomb.

Jeronime liked Monsieur Colomb, and she was sorry for him, because she instinctively knew that he was unhappy. When she was a small child she had rather shrunk from unhappy people, as healthy childhood usually does. She had given her pity only to unhappy beasts, to lame dogs, or broken-winged birds, or rabbits hurt in cruel traps. Now, with womanhood, her compassion for pain of any sort was beginning to find channels. Jeronime's sympathy would never be facile or easily expressed, but it would be genuine and deep and selfless. She averted her eyes from the old man, who was muttering to himself, his nervous old hands tightly clasped, his white head bowed. She got up softly, shy of intruding on him, but as she rose he looked round, saw her, and followed her out of the church.

"It is very wrong that you should be running about Paris alone," he said. "I am forced to interrupt my prayers in order to accompany you home."

He spoke with irritable reproach, and Jeronime forgot her compassion.

"I always go about by myself when I am in England. I don't see what *can* happen to me, or why I should not," she said, with a touch of obstinacy. "I am sorry that you should have interrupted your prayers for me."

She was not very attentive to the long exordium he delivered on the impossibility of her behaviour. She had an unpardonably tiresome way of occasionally letting her mind wander right away from the person who was talking to her. Jeronime, though she had uncommonly fine stuff in her, was no more perfect at seventeen than are most of us.

"You do not listen, Mademoiselle!" the old man cried in so exasperated and angry a voice that her vagrant thoughts flew back startled. "You do not pay me common civility! No, you are like some one else I could name! You secretly make a mock of all I say to you, though I am wise and you are very foolish. You hold your chin in the air, and you do not listen."

Jeronime stood still in distress and surprise. When she was much in earnest she never spoke quickly, but with slow emphasis.

"I was *not* mocking, indeed I was not!" she said. "I did not mean to hold my chin in the air. I think I must do that without knowing that I do it. Why, it would be perfectly shameful of me to mock at you, who are Mr. Knight's friend and who have been so kind to me."

"Oh, that is nothing—nothing whatever," he cried, twitching with impatience. "Kind to you? One may be kind, one may be indulgence itself—it does not matter, it does not count, it makes no difference, except that one is the more despised."

His fierceness was out of all proportion to Jeronime's offence. She stared in amazement at him.

"Yes, despised and overlooked, and treated like a blind old idiot, who need not be considered, to whom no one owes so much as an apology!" he said.

"*Oh!*" gasped Jeronime.

Then it occurred to her that this was hardly fair. Surely she had done nothing that required a serious apology. Though she was shy, she was not exactly timid or easily bullied.

"I suppose I ought not to have gone out alone here, but I don't think I was so *very* bad, monsieur," she said. "I ran

after Mr. Knight, but I could not catch him up, so then I just turned into that church in order to get my breath (for I had been hurrying) and to rest for a few minutes. I did not mean to do anything wrong. I did not mean any harm."

"What did you mean?" said Monsieur Colomb sharply.

He had not listened to her explanation, but fastened abruptly on her last words. "Now you may tell me, for I will know sooner or later, Mademoiselle. 'Maman,' you said. Yes, yes, I heard!—I heard it distinctly! You turned red and then white when you saw my wife, and your eyes—but they are not Anne's eyes—grew as round as two plates. 'Maman'!"

He imitated her voice in a funny falsetto, which made Jeronime nearly laugh in the midst of this bewildering development of the tragedy.

"Why did you say '*Maman?*' What are you to my wife?"

"Nothing. I made a mistake," said Jeronime.

She spoke deliberately, and the old man was baffled though not satisfied. His doubt of Anne was not a growth of to-day or yesterday.

"Ah, you look honest, but you can all lie, every one of you," he muttered.

But it seemed to Jeronime that she had not been lying, but only speaking a most bitter truth. Maman had disowned her, she was in truth nothing to her.

When she re-entered the drawing-room Anne greeted her with a smile, kinder than the smiles which she bestowed on most people.

"So your old knight has brought you safely back," she said.

"I went out again by myself, after Mr. Knight left me," said Jeronime. "Monsieur Colomb found me sitting in the Church of the Ascension, and he interrupted his prayers to walk home with me—and to scold me."

"He was quite right!" cried Anne energetically. "You should not have gone out alone, my child. Never, never must you do such a thing while I have charge of you!"

"I am not your child—or else I really *am* your child," cried Jeronime. "Maman, I met godmother to-day. She is coming here to see me. If she sees you I think that she may know you, unless you tell a great many stories, or persuade her that you are not yourself and that she has never met you before.

"I fear you have had a touch of the sun, Mademoiselle. Mr. Knight should not take you out in this heat," said Anne coldly.

"But if you do that I will not stay to listen to them," continued Jeronime, brushing aside the remark about the sun. "I will not pretend! I shall write to Mr. Knight. I shall tell him I am so unhappy that he must take me away and find lodgings for me, just till we are married."

"Then he will think that you are an extremely ungrateful little girl, and he will have reason," said Anne.

She was angry, for a conflict of wills always roused her. Yet under the anger she was touched.

This stupid, pertinacious child! How she harped on one string! She would not "pretend." Yet she was loyal.

"There! I trust you, Nanon," cried Anne suddenly, and the old baby name sounded sweet on her lips. "Of course, you are my child, but have you not the sense to see that that fact must be kept secret? What is the use of blazoning it abroad? It is better not spoken of—even between us two!"

"I *knew!*" said Jeronime. "I remembered your voice. You did not trust me, Maman, you could not prevent my knowing. You would have prevented it if you could. I don't call that 'trusting' a person. But I have thought what I had better do."

She went to the writing-table, and sitting down began to write.

"You can read what I am writing if you like," she said. "But when I am once married I shall tell Mr. Knight everything, *of course*." She twisted round in the chair, lifting candid, somewhat defiant eyes to meet Anne's.

Madame Colomb had been standing behind Jeronime and looking over the girl's shoulder.

Something, Heaven knew what, sent a thrill through her as their eyes met.

"You baby!" she cried, and then forgot herself and prudence and the exigencies of life, and laid her hands caressingly on Jeronime's shoulders. "I wonder, after all, *is* it the best thing for you?" she cried. "He is so very old for you, little Nanon! Rich? Ah, yes, and that is a great deal —and kind, too! but so very old for a little green thing just coming into bud."

Jeronime put down her pen and rose to her feet with some offended dignity.

"If you are talking about Mr. Knight, Maman," said she, "I have never once thought about his being rich; and as to his being old, I like old men much the best. My mind is quite settled and made up."

Anne laughed. The offended dignity amused her, but Jeronime was in sober earnest.

"No one must laugh about Mr. Knight and me. There is nothing to laugh at. I love him very much, and I am sure he loves me very much—though I daresay it seems strange that he should—and that is why—and that is the only reason why —I will marry him."

Anne opened her lips to speak, then restrained herself. Perhaps it was the best thing. I fear that (like the doctor) she reflected that in any case Jeronime would not have to repent for a lifetime if her married life proved irksome. She stooped, caught Jeronime's face between her two hands and kissed it, and then went quickly away, and so their strange interview ended.

Jeronime was surprised at the kiss. Maman was beyond her understanding.

Mr. Knight received Jeronime's letter the next morning. A chill fear struck him when he saw the envelope addressed in that round, laborious handwriting. It came up on the tray with his early coffee. He sat in his grey dressing-gown, and he looked grey altogether. He told himself that he guessed what Jeronime had to say. Yesterday evening it had seemed to him that he had felt her beating against the bondage of his

kind grasp. He had a premonition that this written message would give him the signal to set her at liberty.

He did not open the envelope with lover-like haste. He sipped his coffee first, and looked out of the window, and observed the hands of a clock opposite, and set his own watch, and said aloud that in five minutes' time he would read what little miss had to tell him.

"I had far rather she had spoken; but there! she is afraid of giving me pain. She half guesses what an old fool I am about her—but only half, only half," he muttered.

He would not hold her for one minute after she had realised that she wanted freedom, but what was to be done? Already his mind harked back anxiously to plans for her. The hand of the clock crept on. He poured out more coffee and tried to eat, but his breakfast did not please him—he had no appetite that morning.

"It really seemed the most feasible idea—though I am old," he said. "But something has put her off it! I saw yesterday that she was miserable. She need not take much trouble to explain to me. I can understand her. I have always understood her. Well, well, I must read it, I suppose."

He opened the envelope slowly and read—

"My dear Mr. Knight,—Please can we be married sooner than Wednesday fortnight? Could you run away with me very quickly and without telling any one (except Madame Colomb) the day or hour? I am writing this because I do not wish any one to come to the wedding. Godmother will want to be present, and I do not know how I can prevent her in any other way. This is not a fancy. I have a serious reason. *Please do what I ask.* I know that you do not like to be hurried, nor do I usually. I will promise never to hurry you again if you will forgive me and marry me very soon now.

"Your loving
"Jeronime."

The start of joyful surprise, driving his lying premonitions away, seemed for the moment to give Mr. Knight back ten years of life. He straightened his shoulders and sat very upright, with a gleam in his grey eyes.

"*If* I will forgive you, and marry you very soon now," he repeated. "*If* I will be so kind, eh, Jerry?"

. . . . .

Two days later they were married.

CHAPTER XXI

MRS. MACILVERT heard of the hurried wedding on the day after its accomplishment, for Jeronime wrote to her quondam guardian while she was actually on the way to Calais.

"I cannot explain to you why I have run away like this. It must seem very ungrateful and unkind of me, not to have told you about our change of arrangements. I am sorry that I seem to be always doing ungrateful things. It is not that I did not write what was true when I wrote that I wished *you* could be at my wedding. It was true then, but afterwards I found that there was a reason why we had better go away from France quickly. I did not really forget you, and I never will.

"Your affectionate godchild,

"JERONIME KNIGHT.

"PS.—It is rather nice to have a *real* surname now!"

Dr. MacIlvert was immensely interested in this missive.

"She's a bad hand at keeping a secret," said he; "she so plainly lets you see that there is one. Now what was the reason, d'you suppose? Eh, Lucy?"

"I do not know or care," said Lucilla wearily. "But I am grieved that I was not at the church. I believe that whatever the reason was, she was grieved too. Joy is not without heart after all."

"She evidently was determined that we shouldn't be present," said the doctor. "Now why? Old Knight is straight enough. There can be no mystery about him."

"If there is a mystery anywhere, I shall certainly not

attempt to discover it!" said Lucilla loftily, for it vexed her to see him attentively re-read Jeronime's letter. "I never should dream of asking questions where confidence is withheld."

"Oh, nor should I! I'm not such a fool!" said the doctor, laughing. "But I might find out something all the same."

"Why should you? I see plenty of reason why you should *not*," said Lucilla.

"Why? Oh, because any knowledge may come in useful—it's always so much to the good," said he, speaking from the experience of a varied career.

When his wife took that tone he was occasionally apt to air aggressively "low" sentiments, and his blue eyes twinkled, but Lucilla did not reply. Truth to tell her heart was heavy with fear and anxiety. She was oppressed by a secret too, and it was of a most unpleasant and burdensome description!

When, immediately after their marriage, Dr. MacIlvert had tried to persuade her to cease to bank with the old Durham firm of Parkyns and White, Lucilla had been so indignant on the subject that she and her doctor would certainly have quarrelled had it not been that it takes two to make a quarrel and he was imperturbable.

"*No* private bank is safe in these days, Lucy," he had said; "and as to Mr. Parkyns' father having been your father's old friend, that has nothing whatever to do with the son's solvency! You've a terribly dangerous and expensive habit of mixing up sentiment and business! Come now, how much money have you in their hands? Five thousand? Well, well! I daresay if they were to fail it wouldn't break you to lose five thousand, but get your securities and bonds out, for I've heard something queer about young Parkyns. Look here, my dear, I'll give in about your balance. With your fortune I'll allow it's hard if you mayn't be sentimental if it pleases you, but get out the securities. We don't want to be bankrupt!"

Now Lucilla greatly disliked and resented any interference in her money affairs. She was even a little suspicious on that

score. Yet she had apparently yielded. Her will always gave way when it was set against his, and he believed that she had taken his advice. He was both too sensible and too good-tempered a man to rub a sore place unnecessarily. He saw her write a letter to Mr. Parkyns, which he dictated, and another to Quentin Mavis, authorising him to receive the securities for her, and there he believed that the matter had ended. As a matter of fact Lucilla never posted those letters. For once she had cheated him, and now Nemesis pursued her.

Parkyns and White had failed! Parkyns had absconded. Lucilla's balance was gone! but that, as the doctor had remarked, would have mattered comparatively little. What really did matter was that before absconding Mr. Parkyns had realised on her bonds, and that her little bit of sentiment, combined with her little bit of deception and his roguery, had proved her ruin!

Lucilla turned quite sick as she read Quentin Mavis's communication on the subject. What would her doctor say? There had once been a time when she had rather enjoyed the sensation of being just a trifle afraid of him, and of recognising that under his surface good-humour and imperturbability there lay an element of something—was it strength or brutality?—that caused her a shiver. But in those days she had not been his wife, nor so completely in his power; she did not enjoy that sensation now!

Dr. MacIlvert noticed her silence and smiled. Lucilla was much less high-flown than she had been once, and that was owing to his influence!

"You are much easier to live with than you used to be, my dear!" he remarked frankly.

She looked at him rather appealingly.

"I used to have a very high standard, Wallace," she said, "but I remember that you told me that you liked women to have impossible ideals."

"So I do, so I do!" said he. "Ideals are pretty for pretty ladies! I've always had a weakness for pretty things, and you could well afford 'em."

"Which? The pretty things or the ideals?" said Lucilla, trying to smile.

"Both," said he, "and I'm not joking about it. You may be as particular as you choose, my love! Indeed I should be angry if you were not. Only you may just as well bear in mind that it is easy enough to wear dainty clothes, moral as well as material, when you've got fifteen thousand a year, and can always meet your creditors. Your sentiments are the natural garb of a rich woman's soul, and mind you, since I've had my fill of good things, *I've* been as virtuous as you please too! Every now and then, Lucy, you raise your pretty eyebrows at me—but that's because you have never been hungry."

Lucilla momentarily forgot her secret.

"Don't! I can't bear to think that you were ever hungry while I had too much," she cried, "but material things are not everything. You—you would still have loved me if I had been poor, wouldn't you, Wallace?"

"If you had been poor you would have been an utterly different woman," he said drily, "and you wouldn't have spent so much money on doctors! I can't say what might or might not have happened then."

He went out presently, and she sat with her head resting on her hands, and studied Quentin Mavis's words again, and tried dizzily to realise what all this terrible business meant. It occurred to her that if she had not married Dr. MacIlvert she would certainly have gone to him for counsel now, and without any of these sickening qualms of misgiving! He might possibly have told her that she had been very silly (he was always plain spoken), he might have said, "You are much too generous and trusting for this wicked world, my dear lady! It doesn't 'do' to trust any one," but he would have had no right to be angry, and the loss would have been entirely her own affair. Now, alas! it was *his* affair too!

People, some few people who had been bolder or more interfering than the majority of her acquaintance, had warned Lucilla against the doctor. It had been hinted that he would probably first make away with her money and then ill-use her.

He had, on the contrary, put her affairs into excellent order wherever he had had a free hand, and had she followed his recommendation this catastrophe would not have occurred. It is the unexpected that meets us! Poor Lucilla laughed hysterically in the midst of her distress when she meditated on how prophecies were reversed! Behold it was *she* who had got rid of the money, and from her heart she wished (just then) that it had been the other way round.

"If only it had been Wallace who had speculated wildly, or done something demonstrably foolish in the teeth of warnings, and so lost every penny we possessed, I could have borne the loss with such a light heart," thought Lucilla. "I should have said, 'What does money matter, when we love each other?'"

It was pretty certain that he wouldn't say *that!* But what would he say? Here she was confronting that question again; it opened a vast field of speculation, and the poor woman was really to be pitied, for in the first place nothing in the whole range of human speech could be quite so alarming as her formless imaginings, and in the second place it was sadly borne in on her that she really was never quite certain that she knew how Dr. MacIlvert would behave under any extraordinary circumstances. The more she considered the predicament, the more terrified she became.

"I will tell him this evening, when he has had his dinner, and is smoking comfortably," she determined.

Before her marriage she had never tried to choose a propitious moment for speaking to any one; she had been apt to declare that she despised the kind of women who stoop to petty wiles.

"But there is no doubt about it! I am *not* as high-minded as I once was," Lucilla owned to herself with a sigh.

The doctor in the meanwhile, having no foreboding of ill news, went out in excellent spirits. He had thoroughly enjoyed his honeymoon! No illusions had been destroyed where he was concerned. Lucy wasn't young, and she was extravagant, and she was a bit of a fool, but he had been perfectly aware of all that from the first five minutes of their acquaintance, and he really liked her. He was, perhaps,

rather touched by the way in which she worshipped him. Even a rogue likes to think that, somewhere at bottom, he is not such a bad fellow after all! Dr. MacIlvert did not often attempt to whitewash his own character in his own eyes. He was aware that he had done indefensible things in the course of his life, but when he thought about "Lucy" he smiled good-humouredly and was, in truth, rather pleased with himself for the way in which he got on with her.

He had sworn that he would be kind to Lucy. He had sworn it to her—of course; but he had also, and that oath was the more binding, sworn it to himself.

"And I *am*," he reflected. "If I had been an Arthur or a Galahad she wouldn't have been happier—and Arthurs and Galahads don't go in for rich maiden ladies."

He bought some cigars for himself, and a bunch of late crimson roses for her, and then he went to reconnoitre the house in which the Colombs lived. He had scented a mystery, and mysteries had once or twice proved profitable to him. Nowadays he had no need to make a profit after such questionable and risky fashions, but old habits stick—besides, he was extremely inquisitive.

His investigation was quickly successful. A carriage and pair stood in front of the door. As he passed it for the second time Madame Colomb came out and stepped into the carriage. She was such a striking woman that the doctor might have been pardoned for pausing to look at her. It happened that the footman, in arranging her carriage rug, whisked her card-case into the street. Doctor MacIlvert darted forward with creditable alacrity and picked it up; as he handed it to her with a bow, his eyes met hers, and she changed colour. He watched her out of sight with an amused chuckle. So there was the secret! Madame Colomb was his old acquaintance, the music mistress who had got rid of her child with such *sangfroid* and composure, and Jeronime had found her mother, and had feared a recognition.

"A pretty little secret—but it doesn't matter to me!" he said to himself. "Madame Colomb is safe so far as I am concerned. I am sure I don't want to upset her apple-cart!"

He had never been villainous for the sake of villainy, only —sometimes—for the sake of comfort.

Lucilla was dressed for dinner when he returned to the hotel. He noticed that she was looking ghastly. Indeed the most inobservant husband could hardly have failed to see that the poor woman ate nothing, and that her hand shook so that she could hardly lift her glass of wine to her lips. Dr. MacIlvert gave her the roses (she loved to receive small attentions), but to-night they hardly won a smile from her, and when he pressed her to eat she nearly cried.

"What's the matter, Lucy? What's all this about?" he asked, when dessert was on the table and the footman had withdrawn, and the moment had come in which she had meant to have confessed.

She held that terrible letter in her hand! It seemed to burn her fingers! but she was powerless to give it to him.

"Nothing! That is—I don't know how to tell you, Wallace!" she said piteously.

"Why, what on earth can you have been up to, my dear?" said he, laughing; "you look as if you were about to be hanged! What are you holding under the table, eh? A *billet doux*? Let's see!"

He stretched out his hand suddenly and caught her wrist. He was very merry that night! She heard him make some joke, in a voice that suddenly seemed to have receded quite a long way off from her. He took the paper from her hand, and then, to his immense surprise, and before the joke had died on his lips, Lucilla slid away from him, dropping sideways off her chair in a dead, unmistakable faint.

Lucilla was not in the habit of fainting. She had never done it before in the whole course of her life. When she returned to consciousness she felt vaguely that she had died and was glad of it! Then that after all she was *not* dead, but would have to return to a new order of things.

She lay very still for a time. She did not want to return! Then she opened her eyes cautiously. The doctor was not in the room. Only Rowlands was with her.

"He has just this moment gone out, ma'am," said Row-

lands. "He waited till you 'came to,' then he said you would be best left quiet for a bit. It's the heat tries you, ma'am! Paris is a nasty hot place."

"Did he—did he read——" began Lucilla, but checked herself.

Rowlands shrewdly suspected that Dr. and Mrs. MacIlvert had had a tiff, but she was discretion itself. Though she had been jealous of Jeronime, and afraid lest that adopted child should gain any ascendency over her mistress, she was not jealous of the doctor. The doctor had known how to manage her, and he had relieved her mind of a terrible fear! Rowlands thought him a very nice gentleman, and liberal into the bargain.

"I don't want you now. I am quite well again," said Lucilla. "Leave me. He will be coming back."

But when Rowlands had left the room Lucilla became possessed by the idea that the doctor would *not* come back, that she had seen the last of him!

She lay with her head buried in the sofa cushions, and went through the most miserable experience of her life. It has been said that the doctor had done a good deal of unveiling; he was not himself aware how much he sometimes startled her. He had shown this poor lady motives undraped, natural instincts that she had never taken into account, facts that had horrified her. She had lived and breathed in a scented hothouse atmosphere, and he had come in with a whiff of keen air from the outside—and not a garden-scented whiff, but rather one redolent of tobacco! She had lost belief in herself and her own charm, and she had lost confidence in life, and now a grim and ugly knowledge stared at her. He had loved her money, but not her! Why after all should he have loved her? "He will never come back," she repeated.

Somehow she did not feel inclined to reproach him. Reproaches are always futile and beside the point, but she wondered what he *would* do? She remembered that she had been afraid all the afternoon of what he might say, of how he would take that bad news, but now she wondered why she had

been afraid, because nothing that he could have said would have been so hopelessly dreary as his absence.

The window was open. He had flung up the sash when she fainted. Lucilla got up presently and leaned out. All the lamps were lit down below. The day had been close, but now it was raining hard and a streaming pavement reflected the glimmer of lights. A girl in the street was selling autumn violets. The doctor had once told his wife a horrible tale about a flower-girl whom he had gone to see in the poor quarter of Paris. He had had many odd experiences among poor as well as among rich folk. Though he may have been a bit of a quack and a bit of a robber, he had not been entirely devoid of compassion, and he had always taken a vital interest in life. The flower-girl had been killed by the man she lived with.

"I cannot bear to hear of such horrors! and I cannot see why they are allowed," Lucilla had said shuddering.

He had replied rather gravely, "If when you say 'allowed' you mean allowed by law, why, crime is not legal, my dear, as any child knows. If you mean allowed by the Almighty, why Humanity is pretty gouty! Every now and then its disease breaks out in nasty sore places morally as well as literally! Allowed? Why, how should it be otherwise?"

She had not quite understood, but she remembered, as she remembered everything that he said, and now those words of his haunted her. She kept repeating them to herself as if they were the refrain of a melancholy song.

"How should it be otherwise? How should it be otherwise?"

The wind rose with the rain clouds. Its cold dampness after the heat of the day seemed to blow right through her as she stood there in her pretty evening gown. Then she moved away from the window and studied herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. The mirror cruelly reflected a painfully haggard, eager-eyed woman, and behind her the table with the basket of fruit and the crimson roses, and the pink-shaded candles in silver candlesticks.

"He liked all *that*," thought Lucilla. "But I am very old

and ugly. He never really cared about me, and now he will desert me, and *how should it be otherwise?*"

No other side of the situation occurred to her. She never once thought what she should do without money, nor how she should live. The waiter came in to carry away the plates; he offered to shut the window, but she shook her head impatiently, and he went away. Ten o'clock struck, and then eleven, and twelve. Lucilla had returned to the window. The rain drifted in on her, but she did not notice it. When midnight struck a noisy party, just returned from a theatre, entered the hotel. The sound of their voices seemed to break the spell of dazed misery that had held Lucilla; she shivered and said to herself drearily, that since there was no use in sitting up, she might as well go to her bedroom, and was just going when the door opened and her husband came in.

"Well, Lucilla! It seems that you've played me a pretty trick," he said, but checked himself at sight of her face. "Why, you look at me as if I were a ghost!"

"I thought that you would never come back. I thought that you had gone away for—always," said Lucilla.

He stared at her for a moment. Then he strode across the room and shut the window with a decisive bang.

"The room is quite cold—and so are you. Good gracious, woman! if I *wasn't* ever coming back, was that any reason for catching a death of cold?"

"But I really thought you would never come back," Lucilla repeated.

She was immensely relieved. She dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands. The action and attitude forcibly reminded him of another time, when she had sat just so in the drawing-room at Hollowdene, when he, with his back against the wall, had been fighting hard for his footing. No doubt it had been very silly of her, but how she had believed in him then! He had had some right to be angry. A much better man than Dr. MacIlvert might have lost his temper under the circumstances, but that vivid remembrance softened him.

"I gather from this that that precious son of your father's

old friend has made off with your securities," he said. "Then you never really took my advice. You pretended to, eh? What became of the two letters that you wrote at my dictation? One was to your lawyer, and one to your banker."

"I burnt them both," said Lucilla. "I did not wish to do as you told me to—and after all, Wallace, it was my money."

"Yes, it *was*," said the doctor drily. "If you had not been quite such an idiot it would be still! *I* should never have made ducks and drakes of your fortune! I know what it means to be without money. We shall have to pay pretty heavily for this little whim of yours. And what on earth you, of all people in the world, will do without——"

"I don't care in the least about that!" interrupted Lucilla. "But I thought you had gone quite away!"

It seemed strange, even to herself, but she no longer minded about anything now that he had come back. In her relief at seeing him, she had ceased even to be afraid of his displeasure.

The doctor swore under his breath, and sat down by her.

"You were made more or less of a fool, Lucy!" he remarked somewhat grimly. "Though if you had not been so cosseted all you life I daresay you would not have been such a big one; and I was made more or less of a knave, I suppose, though if it had not been for something that happened at the beginning of my career I should have drawn the line before some of the things I've done—but seeing it is so, we were evidently bound to come together, and may as well make the best of each other's idiosyncrasies, eh?"

Lucilla looked at him with rather startled eyes.

"I don't think that you are a knave, Wallace," said she.

"Don't you? Then why, my dear lady, did you at once conclude that you'd seen the last of me directly your money was gone?" said he.

Lucilla made no reply. The question was perhaps unanswerable!

"Why?" insisted the doctor. He pinched her arm to emphasise the question, and then exclaimed—

"Your sleeve is wet through! Have you been out in the rain?"

"No. I was standing by the window," said Lucilla.

"Well, what a ridiculous thing to have been doing!" said he.

He was not a dense person. His bluntness of speech sometimes hid a wonderfully acute perception. He knew how Lucilla had stood by that window, too miserable to know that she was wet.

"I'm going to stand by you, my dear," he said. "For if I *am* a knave I am fond of you, and if you are a fool, you stood by me once. Your hands are burning and your dress is very damp. It won't be your fault if you are not ill to-morrow. I am going to put you to bed now. Don't ever cheat me again —that's all, Lucy! It does not pay, and I do assure you that you will get the worst of it if you do."

CHAPTER XXII

SUMMER seemed to have all but fled, when she stayed her footsteps, relented, and turned back. The end of August had been unseasonably cold in the North of England. A driving wind had shattered the roses in the garden of the Yellow House, and scattered the petals across the grass, and flung them, like little fairy boats, crimson, and pink, and yellow on the water of the lake. But now suddenly there was a lull, and it was hot again. September came in wrapped in mellow beauty. The butterflies fluttered, making the most of their short lives. The bees, who had been sadly discouraged by the early nipping cold, and who had been consumed by painful anxiety about the state of their winter stores, went about their business with renewed activity. The old tortoise that Mr. Knight fed with bread-and-milk re-emerged from his hole. He had retired in a sulky pet, long before his usual time, declaring the world unfit for any reasonable creature to stay awake in, but the hot sun soaked into his grave, and he felt it through his shell, and put his head out once more. Slowly, slowly he unburied himself and crawled stiffly along the warm bricks of the terrace, and there met his old master returning home with a bride!

"It's the dear tortoise come to meet us," cried Jeronime.

She plumped down on her knees and bestowed a kiss on his shell. One or two tears warm as spring rain dropped on it. Jeronime was in an extraordinarily melting mood. One is not married every day, and perhaps the sight of the Yellow House and of the garden moved her.

"Must you waste your kisses on that dull old beast, Jerry?" said Mr. Knight.

She stood up and put her hand in his, and he led her into the house.

There, in the hall, Mrs. Lovesaye had a little speech ready. It was intended to be a congratulatory speech, for Mrs. Lovesaye had very good manners, but her congratulations were tinged by her strong sense of the impropriety of her master's sudden proceeding. If he would have seen his way to giving them all a bit of notice, they would have had some decorations up, she explained—an archway with a suitable inscription at the very least! As it was, it had been all she could do to get the rooms ready. She was sure she wished Mr. Knight and his lady joy—but here she paused, for where was Mr. Knight's lady, and what was Miss Jeronime doing?

"I thought you was in foreign parts, missy," she said.

"So I was yesterday," said Jeronime. "We left France yesterday evening and got to Southampton very early this morning. It's a long way from Southampton to Durham, you know. Oh, I am so glad to be at home!"

Mrs. Lovesaye looked still more puzzled. She was very fond of Jeronime. She had taken to the child from the moment when she saw her in Mr. Knight's arms, a tear-stained "lost little lamb," crying for home and nurse.

"And I am glad to see you again, missy, I'm sure," she said.

Then she drew Mr. Knight's telegram from her pocket and thrust it into Jeronime's hand.

"Have I mistook what he wrote, miss?" she whispered, "surely I've made a mistake."

Jeronime read aloud in her fresh, clear voice.

"'Coming home to-day with my wife. Tell coachman to meet seven o'clock train at Durham. Have everything ready for us.' That's all right, Mrs. Lovesaye."

Mr. Knight cleared his throat. Jeronime's haste had left no time for explanations, but that had been quite a minor consideration.

"Let me present my dear wife and your mistress to you," he said.

He liked a little formal speech. The situation did not embarrass him, as it would probably have embarrassed a younger man. He tried to take Jeronime's hand again, to lead her forward, but Jeronime's eyes were fixed on Mrs. Lovesaye's amazed countenance. Her old friend was transfixed by surprise, and drawing back a step, half made a formal curtsey.

"I am sure I beg your pardon, ma'am," said she.

"Don't, don't!" cried Jeronime.

She thought with dismay that if Lovesaye were going to be cross, she did not know what she should do! Lovesaye who had petted her, and told her to mind her manners! On whose knee she had sat (almost as often as she had sat on Mr. Knight's) and who had made heart-shaped cakes for her and taught her to knit. She interrupted Mr. Knight's speech. This was really not the moment for it. She seized Mrs. Lovesaye energetically by both arms.

"Listen to me! Don't be cross! oh, don't be cross, Lovesaye," she cried. "Of course I know it's a great surprise, and it seems all wrong! But here I *am*, you know, and it might have been worse. I might have been a grand person who had never once sat on your lap, nor eaten bread-and sugar in the housekeeper's room."

"I know my place, ma'am," said Mrs. Lovesaye repressively, "and if those things did occur when you was a child, that's past and gone, and it's not for me to dictate, though I can't say but what it do seem as if I might have been told of the circumstances and not taken unawares like this."

"But Mr. Knight only married me yesterday afternoon," said Jeronime, "and it was done in a great hurry at the last, and then, directly the wedding was over, we went on board the steamer, and we have travelled straight home to the Yellow House because we both think there is no place like it."

She glanced round her at the dearly loved hall, at the pictures of men and women whose blood (though she did not know it) ran in her own veins. Then she drew herself up and turned to Mr. Knight with a brave smile.

"And I am so very glad we did so," she said, for whatever

happened he should not think she was damped by her reception.

Mrs. Lovesaye took off her spectacles, which she had put on to re-read that astounding telegram; they had suddenly grown dim. She put them (and her grievance) away.

"Only yesterday afternoon," she said, "and you've had a nasty sea passage since. If you'll come upstairs, missy, I'll just help you off with your cloak. You're finely hungry, I make no doubt. Tea will be ready by the time you are ready for it."

Jeronime followed Mrs. Lovesaye into the big state chamber that had been hastily prepared for the bride on receipt of the news. Heavy silver candlesticks stood on the dressing-table; over the huge canopied bed was a coverlet worked hundreds of years ago. The design was the Tree of Life, and it was embroidered in blue and green. Butterflies and parrots perched on its branches. Jeronime hardly dared put her jacket and hat on the top of such magnificence. She looked round her with very solemn eyes. It was a relief to see Mrs. Lovesay's familiar, kind face, grave, but no longer cross.

"So you were married in a hurry only yesterday, miss—ma'am, I should say," said Mrs. Lovesaye, who certainly would not have been human if she had not been a little inquisitive.

"Yes. Oh, I hope I shall do!" said Jeronime. "I know I am not nearly good enough for Mr. Knight, of course, but I do hope I shall do!"

Mr. Knight was waiting for Jeronime at the bottom of the great staircase. He watched her descend it, with a look of satisfaction in his eyes. He had delighted in that staircase from the moment when he first saw it, but his joy in it had been incomplete till now.

"I have sometimes wondered whether you would come down by the right or the left branch, Jeronime," said he.

Jeronime looked at him wonderingly. "Did it matter? I don't understand."

He laughed gently, and drew her hand through his arm as they went together to the library.

"No, no! How should you understand, my dear? When I've been alone here I have listened to many footsteps up and down those stairs. Of late years they've grown so distinct that though I am certainly neither superstitious nor imaginative, I've been inclined to the conclusion that their growing clearness portended my own death. I have never had any foolish fear of ghosts (indeed until within the last year or two I have considered them a mere figment of diseased fancy), but I have reflected with some pleasure 'when little miss reigns here she will walk with a firm living tread up these stairs, and will put these bodiless shadows to flight.' You must know, Jerry, that I left all this by will to you, before ever I dreamed of marriage, and there has seldom been a day in which I have not pictured you here, in this house that has always seemed more yours than mine. I did not think to see this day. I naturally supposed that *I* should be buried first, and that then you would come to your own over my grave, but this is a better plan, eh, my little love?—a far better plan."

He rubbed his hands together, with almost boyish glee, and for the second time that day tears stood in Jeronime's eyes. She was not unhappy, but his happiness somehow touched her with an odd sense of almost unbearable pathos. The old place was pathetic in itself, and too full, as he had said, of shadows. How many couples had crossed that hall clinging together, and had now gone singly into the unknown, and passed through that veil which we must each, in turn, pass through!

"We *now*—for how long, I wonder? And who'll come after us?" said she.

But the next moment Mr. Knight opened the library door, and Jeronime turned from that rather awful wonder to a healthy pleasure at sight of the old silver teapot, and the blue and gold china cups, and the cheerful wood fire that greeted them.

"Oh, isn't this nice and homelike?" she cried. "Tea with you in the library used to be a great treat; but now I shall have the treat every day! When I was a little girl godmother

once asked me what I should choose if a fairy gave me three wishes, and I said, 'First to find Mère Marthe; next to have my tea with Mr. Knight in the library every day of my life; thirdly, never to have to change my frock in the evening.' Godmother said since I wished for such very stupid things, I might be sure I should never meet with a fairy. Look! Mrs. Lovesaye has made her heart-shaped cakes for us! Do you not think that this tea and these cakes taste much nicer than any other tea or cakes in the world, Mr. Knight?"

She chattered brightly. She was just a little flushed.

Mr. Knight sat and watched her, still with that same dreamy pleasure. He sipped the tea that Jeronime poured out (she no longer found the dragon-handled teapot quite so heavy a responsibility as of yore), and he broke and tasted a lemon-cake, as if the meal were a kind of sacrament.

"Yes, nothing else has ever tasted quite like this to me," he said. "It is more than fourteen years since the day when I first saw this place, and when its charm laid hold on me like a spell. That was strange! *This* is much stranger and yet quite true. Now I will tell you a story, Jerry—something that I have never told you before. It is partly about yourself."

"I had rather that it was about you," said Jeronime. "You see, I know about myself, and I don't think I am interesting (except to you, you know), but lots of things must have happened to you, before ever I was born—couldn't the story be about them?"

It occurred to her at that moment that there was something sad about the fact she had just stated. Yes, indeed; the best part of Mr. Knight's life, all the years of action, were lived before she was born. What was he like when he was young? She tried to picture him young, as he sat there opposite to her, in his armchair. Then she reddened and pushed her thoughts away with an odd sense of disloyalty and shame.

"I will not begin quite so far back, but I will begin about myself," said he, smiling. "You were certainly in the world, but you had only been in it three years, when I drove over with a party of excursionists from Durham, and disgraced

myself by falling fast asleep in the blue drawing-room. I was wakened by the voice of a man who seemed to me to have stepped out of the frame on the wall."

"That is the picture of the De Grouchy with wide-apart eyes, like the eyes of the lady with the hawk, and like my eyes," said Jeronime. "But the lady with a hawk has a good face and he has not."

She listened very silently after that till he had finished the story.

"Then Mr. de Grouchy was my father, and he left me that sum of money," she said when Mr. Knight paused; "but he never so much as *looked* at me!"

"He missed a great deal, my dear," said her old knight tenderly.

A younger man had once said the same thing.

"And Maman was in love with him," said she. "I think he couldn't have been worth falling in love with."

"But now you belong to me," said Mr. Knight, "and though I have told you all this, because it seems to me that you have a right now to know all I know on the subject, yet I do not wish you to let your mind dwell on it."

"*Your* mind has dwelt on it, hasn't it?" said Jeronime. "You have always liked to see a likeness between those portraits and me. That was why you said, when I was a child, that the place was more mine than yours."

She frowned thoughtfully, recalling many other sayings of his. She had taken her dear Mr. Knight for granted when she was a child, now she was beginning consciously to understand him.

"It must be a great surprise to you," said he.

"Ye-es," she answered, "yet I feel as if I had always known it."

"Ah, but that is because you are of their blood," he answered, nodding at the pictures that had been his daily companions.

An obstinate expression came into Jeronime's face.

"I don't wish to be of their blood! I am Maman's child. Maman is not in the least like a De Grouchy."

"You wanted to find her very much, but if I were you I should forget about her, Jerry."

"I *did* find her! Maman is Madame Colomb," said Jeronime.

Mr. Knight's amazement was unqualified. He certainly had had no premonition of this revelation. Though *his* secret had apparently found confirmation in Jeronime's own consciousness, hers found no echo in his. It was simply startling. It even occurred to him that Jeronime had become so obsessed with the determination to find "Maman" that she was the victim of an illusion.

"What ground have you for this assertion, my dear?" he asked at last in his kind, even voice.

"I knew Maman's voice," said Jeronime. "When she spoke to me I *saw* the room where we used to sit when I was a tiny girl. I couldn't mistake her voice. She knew me too, but she pretended she did not at first. Her pretence made no difference to my knowing, but it made me dreadfully unhappy. That was why I was so uncomfortable at Monsieur Colomb's house. Lies make one feel sick, don't they? That was why I could not let godmother come to see my wedding, or call on Madame Colomb. Godmother might have recognised Maman, for I think Maman is not a person one forgets, and then there would have been more and more lies. That was why I begged you to marry me very quickly and take me away. It was lucky it was *you*, wasn't it? Any one else would have asked me tiresome questions. I have been very unhappy about it all."

"My poor little lady! and you never told me," he said.

"No, I did not think I ought to tell Maman's secret to any one then. But I said to her that when I was married, and we were safely away in England, I should tell you, because I mean never to have any secret from you. She understood that."

"Madame Colomb! It is almost incredible," said he. "My dear love, do you think that you have dreamed this?"

Jeronime shook her head.

"If I wanted to dream I would dream a much prettier dream than that. Real things are hard and sharp, and very,

very puzzling; they pierce right through one's nicest dreams and break them."

"Now God forbid!" said he. "For I have dreamed a dream, and it has filled this place with summer, though summer ought to be over for me."

They were both silent for a few minutes, then Jeronime said deliberately—

"It's a good thing I've come. I may be too young; but the family portraits are too old. Dear Mr. Knight, you have lived with people who were alive hundreds of years ago, till you've grown quite melancholy." She hesitated, then a spark of girlish curiosity lit up her face. "Mrs. Lovesaye did tell me that she was sure you saw the ghost. Did you? Did you see a lady in yellow satin, and wax candles alight on the mantelpiece? and did you smell roses? because she was angry that you had bought the Yellow House?"

"I momentarily fancied I saw her," said he, "being deluded by an odd effect of light from the chapel window. You know that there is a superstition that the man who sees that unhappy lady is never his own man again, that she turns his nature upside down. No doubt she had that effect on the unfortunate gambler who won the place to his own undoing. But I am not superstitious, my love. It was *you*, not she, who made my world another world."

Jeronime eyed him rather askance. She felt at home with him when he was fatherly, but anything approaching the lover's attitude slightly perturbed her.

"It is a very sad story," she said. "I don't see that the ghostly lady had any right to be angry with you, anyhow. She must be a very unreasonable ghost."

"Yet sometimes I fear I am an interloper, and have taken what should belong to others," he said. "No, no, I do not mean the Yellow House, that I have saved from ruin—but what should belong to youth."

Jeronime turned red and white. Then the steady affection that she had for him rose up strong and sweet, and in it was the element of protection that is in most good women's love.

"Dear Mr. Knight, I don't half understand anything," said

she, "but shall I tell you what I am thinking? That poor lady whom you—*didn't* see was miserable and fierce and sad, and my father did bad things; and Maman is unhappy, and tells dreadful stories, and all this is very puzzling, like a fog round us; but we ourselves are not just bits of people who went before us. I am Jeronime—and I, Jeronime, am not going to be sad, or bad, I hope." She came round from behind the teapot and knelt beside him. "There are dreams all round us," she said, "but behind the dreams there is something that is *good*. Let us hold obstinately tight to it. *I* am not afraid."

CHAPTER XXIII

ONE of Mr. Knight's many presents to Jeronime had been the present of a birthday. For one September morning, long ago, he had found her seriously meditating on her lack of that possession, dear to luckier children.

"I b'lieve most girls have birthdays," she had gravely said to him. "Godmother says I am seven years old, so I ought to have had seven. Other people have *at least* one birthday a year, you know. I have not had one in seven years. It does seem to be rather a shame, doesn't it?"

"It does. You may have mine, little miss," he had replied promptly. "My dear mother gave it to me, but since she has gone, and there is no one left to keep it, I do not imagine that she would object to my giving it to you."

"Will you really give it to me? Will you always remember it is mine, and say, 'Many happy returns of the day to you, Jerry, and what a big girl you are growing,' really, truly, and faithfully?" said Jeronime.

"Yes, I will, really, truly, and faithfully," Mr. Knight had sworn. "What is more, I will really, truly, and faithfully give you a present, and drink your health in my best port, on the 2nd of March."

He had never failed. Now that Jeronime was old enough to realise the fact, she knew that Mr. Knight had never failed her in anything during the whole course of their friendship. She thought about that a great deal on her nineteenth birthday.

She had stolen out early and wandered into the garden. The gardener was burning weeds, and the pungent smell of their burning mingled with the delicious fresh scents of early

spring. The haze of smoke blew across the Yellow House now and again. Jeronime stood and looked at it.

"I love you! Bless you, dear Yellow House," she said aloud.

She had always been a person who had many secret, quaint fancies, which she never told except to Mr. Knight. She believed that a spoken blessing rests for good, and a spoken curse for evil on the walls of a home. Mr. Knight was fanciful too. The oddly assorted couple had many odd little ways in common.

They had been married seven months, but the seven months had seen a great difference in her. Mr. Knight teased her because she had grown taller since her visit to France. Jeronime had been a person of rather slow development, physically as well as mentally.

"Married women have no business to grow like beanstalks," he had declared. "How am I to be sure where you will end if you go on like this?"

His kind, admiring eyes were full of pride in her, and Jeronime had answered with comfortable confidence—

"Oh, you'll like me whatever happens!"

The unrestful consciousness of never quite fulfilling expectations that had haunted her childhood was laid now and for ever. The knowledge that she could do no wrong in her husband's eyes was both humbling and sweetening. Yet her life was by no means unclouded. Mr. Knight was very tender to the child in her, pathetically eager to guard her youth and not allow her to become old and grave before her time, but Jeronime was secretly anxious about him, though rather, perhaps, about his health of mind than about his health of body.

The least contradiction fretted him. He had lived so long alone that the friction of an opposing view was a morbid irritation rather than a healthy stimulant to him. Jeronime, who ruled her life on very broad and simple lines, came to the conclusion that her first duty was to please her old husband, and yielded to all his wishes with the docility of a strong nature. In only one respect had she yielded against

her own conviction. Mr. Knight would not hear of her having anything more to do with Mrs. MacIlvert. It was in vain that Jeronime pleaded that she owed a big unpaid debt to that lady, that she greatly feared that Mrs. MacIlvert's fortune had been seriously injured by the failure of the Durham Bank and by the defection of Mr. Parkyns, that she still more feared that that detestable doctor was showing himself in his true colours by this time and bullying her poor, misguided godmother unmercifully.

"That may be, but having made her own bed, she must e'en lie on it, Jerry," said Mr. Knight. "No one could prevent her from marrying a rascal, and there was an unfortunate time when your best friends could not prevent her from insulting you by allowing him to stay on in the same house after his abominable behaviour to you at that dinner party. I shall never forget that she allowed that. I am now in a position to protect you, and with my leave you will never speak to her again."

"I don't think you are right, Mr. Knight," Jeronime had said candidly.

She still called him "Mr. Knight"; "Thomas" stuck in her throat! But there she had let the matter rest. Nothing was to be gained by argument.

She looked across at Hollowdene as she stood in the garden. She had heard that the place was to be sold. Quentin Mavis, whom she had met by chance one day and stopped to question, had told her so much. She had begged Quentin to come to see her, but the young man had avoided her since her marriage, very much to her disappointment.

Jeronime could not understand the reason of his defection. Quentin had been so kind and friendly in London, and something he had said had made a deep impression on her. It had been something about its being safest to do the kindest thing, since one really knows so little about anything! A most simple sermon!

He had not known that he was preaching at all. But youth learns most readily from youth, and Jeronime, who might have listened to a dozen dissertations on charity and

paid no attention to them had they been offered by age and experience, had more than once turned over those unconsidered words of Quentin's and had even, being of a thorough and honest nature, tried to make use of them in her daily life. Presently she went in to breakfast. Mr. Knight was studying a thick document with seals attached to it. Jeronime saw that he was interested, even excited, about it. She went to his side and rubbed her head against his shoulder with a funny little gesture of affection that had survived her childhood. She asked no questions, because she knew that questions bothered him. He had not been a bachelor for so many years for nothing. When breakfast was over he wished her "Many happy returns of the day."

"You may have fancied that I had forgotten that this is your birthday," he said.

Jeronime shook her head. "Oh no! I should never fancy anything so silly."

"But in that case you would certainly have come to the wrong conclusion," said he, frowning, and taking no notice of her interruption.

He did not like his little speech to be baulked.

"I remembered your birthday, Jeronime, as I have always remembered it. I have, as usual, a present for you, my darling."

He handed the thick document to her. Jeronime took it with an unaccustomed sinking of the heart. It was a deed of gift, and it made over the Yellow House, with all its appurtenances, to her unconditionally.

"I give the Yellow House to you, Jeronime," said he, and his voice shook. "Read—read, my dear! You will see that it is yours. Once—but that was a long time ago—I was fonder of it than of anything in the world."

"Oh!" said Jeronime with a gasp. She turned very red and put down the paper. "I—I don't want you to give it to me."

Mr. Knight nodded his entire approbation.

"No, no; you didn't marry me for the sake of the house, nor yet for the money. You are quite unlike my previous ideas of women," he said. "Sometimes I begin to think that

I may have had some erroneous opinions about them and that they are better than I had fancied. I had, as I once told you, left the Yellow House to you by will, my dear, but of late I have had a great desire to actually see that it is yours. If I were to wait it is possible that I might not see it. The Scripture does not inform us as to how much we shall be permitted to know about what happens on the earth after our bodies are put under it. It therefore occurred to me that it would be better to be on the safe side and to make the place yours while I am still alive."

"I don't like it," persisted Jeronime.

She was seldom unreasonable, but this gift distressed and disturbed her strangely.

"Ah, but you will like it! You must!" he replied. "You will walk up the grand staircase, my love, and you will feel at each step that it is yours—your very own! You will go into the blue drawing-room, but no one will resent *your* intrusion. I wish you to go there this very day. You must enter it with this deed in your hand. Then they will all be satisfied. I have taken good care of the beautiful old house; I have written its history too (and its history is as much part of the nation's history as my finger is part of my body), and now I have given it back—that is right, I have given it back to one of their blood. Dame Alice will not grudge the place to you! You need not be afraid of going into the blue drawing-room on the day of your instalment. You'll see nothing!—neither lady nor candles!—for some of her blood runs in your veins."

"But you do not believe in the ghost, do you?" said Jeronime.

"Of course not, of course not," he said briskly and with a sudden change of tone. "I have never been superstitious. Yet I have a strong feeling of what is *fitting*, my dear, and I should like you to accede to my request."

Jeronime said no more. She had a large and useful faculty for silence. At noonday, when she had done her housekeeping and duly visited her dairy, her bees, and her rose garden, she came to him in the library and put her hand in his.

"Now the sunshine will be on the blue drawing-room," she said, "and we will go and put the deed on the table if you like, and you and I together will lay that ghost."

And together they mounted the stairs, the old man and the girl who had turned his world topsy-turvy.

The sun was streaming into the room, chasing away anything that was eerie. Mr. Knight glanced gravely round him. He had entered the blue drawing-room many times since that memorable evening when he had found Jeronime under the altar in the chapel, but he had never again seen, or imagined that he saw, flaming candles or ghostly lady. He laid the deed on the table, and taking Jeronime's hand in his, held it on the parchment.

"Now this house and all that it contains belongs to Jeronime, my wife, who is the daughter of James de Grouchy," said he.

"What shall I say?" asked Jeronime.

"Say 'Amen,'" said Mr. Knight.

"Amen," said Jeronime solemnly, and they both sat down on the sofa.

Jeronime never laughed at his ways, but now that the little ceremony was over she relaxed a little. The dimple showed in her round cheek and her lips parted in a smile.

"You know I think any one would say we are both *rather* mad sometimes," she remarked.

"Mad or sane, I am satisfied now that this is yours, Jeronime," said he. "But I have something more to say to you."

Then, holding her hand still, he began to explain to her what he wished her to do in the event of his death. He had set his heart on her living in the Yellow House; so long as she lived it must be hers. If she remarried or if she died a childless widow, the Yellow House was to be offered at a nominal price to whoever was then head of the De Grouchy family. The bulk of his fortune would be hers, but he had left very detailed instructions for her guidance should she remain single. "But you will probably marry again," he said firmly. "Your life is only just beginning; you will marry

again. I have left some advice on *that* subject too, my dear. I have immense confidence in your sense, but I think you will do very well to attend to my remarks (dictated by experience) when you have to consider this matter in the future."

"Don't!" cried Jeronime.

There was something funny and something pathetic in the way in which he had written down counsels on the choosing of his successor. But Jeronime blushed hotly and longed to burn the sealed packet "To be read after the death of Thomas Knight, Esq.," which he showed to her with some pride.

"I do not care about men! I have never loved any man but you, Mr. Knight! I shall never marry again if you die. I could not bear you to die!" she cried.

Mr. Knight laughed. The assertion rang pleasantly in his ears.

"I will not deny that you love me, little sweetheart," he said gently, "but——" He left the sentence unfinished and patted her head.

Jeronime sat very still and thoughtful for a time.

"Do you know what I wish very much to do?" she said at last. "I should like to ask Mrs. de Grouchy to come to stay with us and I should like you to tell her about this plan of yours. She will know all about who is the head of the De Grouchy family."

"You may certainly invite her if you wish to, my dear," said Mr. Knight. "But I should greatly doubt whether she would accept your invitation. I have heard that she lives in strict seclusion since her husband's death."

"Yes, I know that. I like her!" said Jeronime. "I don't think I am naturally clever at making friends with people. Women seem to have so many ins and outs, that I can't a bit follow. But I felt that I really could understand Mrs. de Grouchy! She loved her husband more than any one, you know, so now that he is dead she cares for nothing but to pray him out of purgatory. That is so simple and natural, isn't it?"

"No, no," said Mr. Knight. "It is a papistical folly, my love."

But it was not the belief in purgatory, it was the narrow singleness of purpose that Jeronime so well understood.

"She will come if I tell her that I want her very much," Jeronime went on thoughtfully. "She was very kind to me when I was in France. I did not know then why she thought so much about me or why she was so troubled when she thought I was hurried into marrying. *Now* I know! Mr. de Grouchy owed me something which he never gave, and she is trying to pay his debts! Do you remember, Mr. Knight, I told you once before that I believed that Mrs. de Grouchy felt as if she owed me something?"

"Women are strange creatures," said Mr. Knight, "and there is no knowing what fancies they may become possessed with. Even you are fanciful at times, my dear. Why do you want this good lady very much?"

"She *is* good," said Jeronime. "I do not suppose she would mind if the De Grouchy family were not to get the Yellow House after all."

"But it will return to them eventually," said Mr. Knight. "Did you not understand my wish? I will explain the arrangement to you once more."

Jeronime was sometimes slow at taking in an idea, though she was very far from stupid. Mr. Knight, who liked her slowness better than other people's quickness, was about to begin his statement all over again, but she interrupted him.

"Yes, I quite understand what is to be done—if we have no child."

"You don't mean——" said Mr. Knight, and his face twitched. "Why, my little love, surely you don't mean——"

"Yes, I think I do mean," said Jeronime slowly, and then she smiled. "It will upset all your arrangements. You don't mind, do you, Mr. Knight?"

. . . . .

"Mind!" Mr. Knight laughed aloud as he sat by himself in the library that night, after Jeronime had gone upstairs to bed. Mind! Why, this was the crown of life, which he had once believed himself to have missed. His dreams, which he

had fancied unsubstantial as motes in the sunshine, were turning to solid gold in his hands. Yes, he would grasp that which he had laughed at himself for imagining. He rubbed his spectacles, which were very dim. His hand shook. A great awe was upon him. Life had turned out to be far more wonderful than he had thought, and, as he recollected that he was entering the last decade, and nearing the end of it, there came to him a marvellous premonition that on the other side of death it might again be "far more wonderful" than he had guessed.

"But I am not quite ready yet to say, 'Now lettest thou thy servant——'" said he, half aloud. "Not yet, not yet! First I must see my boy and her child."

He thought of a *boy*, not of a baby! The dream-son had never been a baby. The vision that was coming true, the shock of excited joy, confused him slightly. He laughed again, and then caught his breath. A sharp agony of pain clutched at his heart and pierced through him, swift and keen as a knife. His hands caught at the edge of the writing-table; he fell forward with his head on the blotting-book on which so many sheets of the De Grouchy memoirs had been written.

The pain—or was it rather the joy?—had been too great for him, had cut the cord of his life.

Jeronime stole down presently to beg him to come to rest. It was much against her custom to disturb him. She hated to worry or fuss him. She realised that at her dear Mr. Knight's age a man must be allowed to indulge all his little ways in peace. But to-night she was unaccountably anxious. She slipped like a white ghost, in dressing-gown and night-gown, down the great staircase and into the library.

"It is nearly two o'clock," she said, standing in the doorway. "I know you don't like to be interrupted, but you will be *so* tired to-morrow. Do put away your papers and come upstairs."

He did not answer. She noticed that the oil of his reading-lamp was nearly exhausted, and that he had fallen asleep with his head on the table.

"It is chilly in here! It is dreadfully bad for him to sit like that. I must really wake him," thought Jeronime.

But half-way across the big room she stood still with a sensation of fear. It seemed to her that she was not alone with him—there was another presence in the library. There was the figure in the chair and some one—or something—else. She gathered up her courage and ran to him quickly.

"Dear Mr. Knight!" she cried. But as she touched him she knew that that tender protection that had been hers since she was three years old was hers no longer—Mr. Knight was dead.

CHAPTER XXIV

"My old friend Mr. Knight is dead," said Monsieur Colomb suddenly.

He shot off this information at his wife and watched her eagerly. He had contracted an odd and most tiresome trick of firing surprises, much in the same way as that in which that remarkably unpleasant person, Mr. Day, used to experiment on his unhappy *fiancées* by running pins into their arms and letting off firearms close to their ears. Anne seldom turned a hair, though the habit annoyed her. She received the information with apparently unbroken calm. Since she had come to the conclusion that Monsieur Colomb was intent on experimenting on her nerve, she never allowed herself to seem in the least startled. Had he told her that an earthquake had swallowed London she would only have raised her eyebrows, and said, as she said now—

"Indeed! How did this news reach you, Félix?"

Monsieur Colomb had become almost impossibly difficult to live with of late.

"Oh! you do not care! Nothing so unimportant as the death of my dearest and oldest friend has the least interest for you," he cried.

"I care a good deal," said Anne. "I liked your Mr. Knight, I am exceedingly sorry about him. Why do you stare so at me?"

She was sewing at some very fine white cambric. She was a most excellent needlewoman. In the days of her poverty she had made all her own dresses, and made them beautifully, and she had once made all Jeronime's baby-clothes. Behind the inscrutable mask of her handsome face her quick thoughts

were busy. Poor Jeronime! She wished that she could be with the child she had renounced.

"And are you not sorry for his poor little widow? For the girl you made so much of; for—Jeronime?" said Monsieur Colomb.

Again he had something of the air of one who has exploded a bomb, and anxiously awaits a result. Again his wife nodded her calm acquiescence.

"But naturally! Who would not be sorry for her at such a moment? I am not a monster!"

"No, no, you are not a monster; you are not a monster!" said Monsieur Colomb.

He repeated the phrase several times, turning it over fiercely, defiantly, sardonically, till Anne regarded him with astonishment. Her husband really was very queer at times.

"This sad news has upset you," she said, as she threaded the needle with steady fingers. "When did you hear of it?"

It appeared that Monsieur Colomb had heard of his friend's death two days ago, and Anne wondered (rather contemptuously) why he had kept the tidings to himself for so many hours, and what perverted pleasure he could find in trying to make her jump! The worst of it was that although she had self-control enough to baulk him, and to suppress any appearance of excitement, she was, in reality, startled and dismayed. It was not the first time, by a good many, that she longed for the rights she had given up, that she burned to say plainly, "I must go to my daughter."

Jeronime had written to tell her mother of her hopes on the very same day on which she had whispered them to Mr. Knight. That happy little letter beginning, "*Ma chere Maman*," was in Madame Colomb's pocket at the moment when Monsieur Colomb told her of Mr. Knight's death. It was absurd that the union of December and May should have been so blessed! The child too was evidently quite absurdly delighted, but Madame Colomb had been touched. She knew that the shock must have been very bad for Jeronime, and she could not help being anxious, and the anxiety grew and grew because she heard no more, and an anxiety that is

kept caged as well as hungry is apt to wax terribly fierce. She bore it for a long time, but as it grew stronger, she weakened, and at last when October came, she began to throw out hints that she desired a change.

"I have never been the same woman since my illness," she said one day. "I wish that we could travel for a time. I am becoming old, ill-tempered, and ugly, *mon ami!* but perhaps if you and I were to spend a honeymoon together, I might become young again!"

The old man looked at her with inquisitorial intentness. "Yes—there is no doubt that you have aged lately! There are new lines between your eyebrows. Where do you wish to go to—to Italy?"

"I believe that I need bracing," said Anne; "Italy is too hot."

"To Switzerland then, my angel?"

"I do not love mountains. You and I cannot climb mountains. Let us travel to some place not too far off."

"To Holland, for example?"

"But we can neither of us speak a word of Dutch, Félix!"

"To Belgium, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," she assented languidly. "Somehow I can never feel much interested in Belgium!"

"Germany is impossible! I hate the Germans," said Monsieur Colomb. "Nothing would lead me to put a penny into a German pocket. I hate the Germans as much as you hate the English, and with better reason."

"Ah, certainly we will never put our money into German pockets!" she agreed. After a moment's hesitation she added, "But, in spite of my prejudices, I cannot deny that in England there are some places that might be interesting to see."

Again Monsieur Colomb looked hard at her. "So you wish to go to England? Why did you not say so at once? For my part I do not care about that damp little island. I have no wish to go there. The climate would increase my rheumatism."

Anne bit her lip! and put a strong curb on her alarmingly strong impatience.

"Then by all means let us stay at home," she said. Her thread snapped in her hand.

"You are angry! You have an exceedingly bad temper You are so self-willed that the least contradiction enrages you so that you break your cotton and spoil your work," cried Monsieur Colomb, his voice rising shriller and shriller at each assertion. "And what is all this turmoil, all this foolish excitement on your part about, pray? It is merely because I hesitate for a moment, because, being old and a martyr to rheumatism, I do not at once fall in with your latest whim?"

Anne sewed on in silence. She knew that silence irritated him, but there were, alas! moments when she did not care.

"Now you are dumb with rage!" said Monsieur Colomb, lifting an accusing forefinger. Her busy, flying needle seemed to mock him. He twitched the bit of cambric out of her hand. "At least you might have the politeness to listen to me, instead of bestowing all your attention on your finery."

He glanced at what he held. It was a baby's first frock.

"Ah! why do you make these things, Anne?" he faltered, his voice changing. "What—what is the use of this now?"

"The world and his wife go on having children, at the rate of how many?—I forget exactly how many a minute—though ours are dust," said Anne.

Again he looked at her with that odd, questioning intentness, but Anne did not lift the mask. Then he put the little garment on her lap, and got up to leave the room, but stood for a moment with his hand on the door handle. "You may have your own way; yes, you may do entirely as you choose, as usual!" he said. "You shall never excuse yourself by saying that you were afraid of me, that I ill-treated you. Have our boxes packed when you like. We will go to England."

Anne smiled. There was something ridiculous in the bare idea of her puny little old husband inspiring her with fear! She was not the kind of woman who is ill-treated!

"To whom need I make excuses, or to whom should I be likely to say such absurdities?" she asked. "I do not know what you mean!"

She was glad that they were going to England, more glad than she had been about anything for a great many months.

. . . . . .

London was dreary and sunless when the Colombs arrived there in October. A spell of bad weather had set in. The outlines of the houses were blurred with a white fog, which every now and then turned yellow, and when there was less fog it rained. The town was comparatively empty still in the more fashionable quarters. Monsieur Colomb said, with a shrug of his shoulders, that he was not surprised that the richer folk kept away from their dull and dirty town houses as long as possible! He grumbled at the hotel charges. He shivered and caught a bad cold. He was miserable in the public rooms of the Métropole, but absolutely refused the luxury of a fire in a bedroom. He hobbled about, coughing constantly, bent nearly double with lumbago and rheumatism, but feverishly determined to stick close to his wife's side, and to do whatever she did. Anne could not understand this new phase; she supposed, with some contempt, that he was possessed by jealous suspicion! He had trusted her implicitly when she first married, and was young and admired and handsome. She was impatient over this untimely, undignified nonsense, now that she was a matron of many years' standing! Yet there were moments when she softened to the old man. If she had missed the best of life, why, so had he! If he were exacting and pettish, gouty and quarrelsome, why she had realised all that when she married him—it was all in the bargain.

They had been in London a week when it chanced, and it was a rare chance, that Monsieur Colomb went out without Anne. She had persuaded him to make an appointment with a famous gout doctor, and at the last moment he decided to keep it alone.

"You will be gadding all over the town in my absence, I suppose! You will be dashing about in those preposterous hansoms, and throwing my money in handfuls over the shop

counters," Monsieur Colomb said, as his wife helped him into his coat.

"No, it is not worth while," said Anne yawning, for his cough had kept her awake all night, "I have never been a spendthrift, Félix, as you very well know, and you can easily afford to pay for hansoms; but a drive is not worth the price in worry! I will not stir out of this hotel while you are away. Good luck go with you, *mon ami!* I hope that the doctor will give you good advice."

She was determined not to squabble with poor old Félix! He was trying, but she might have done worse; and she flattered herself that, on the whole, *he* might have done worse too. When he was fairly gone, she established herself in a cosy corner of the Moorish Hall, with a sense of luxurious comfort and great relief. No one was likely to disturb her, she scarcely knew a soul in London.

Anne thoroughly enjoyed being alone in a crowd. It is a sensation that frightens some more clinging souls, but she was, and always would be, self-dependent. She liked to watch her fellow-men and women, but had no desire to be in closer touch with them. She was observant, and as clever a judge of character as any one without much sympathy can be. With the sympathy, her powers of judgment and observation would have been first rate.

She held a daily paper in her hand, but did not read it very attentively, and presently she caught the sound of her own name. Some one was inquiring if Madame Colomb were in the hotel. The next moment her heart beat quicker. A burly man, with a reddish, pointed beard streaked with grey, and bright blue eyes, was following the buttons in her direction. She waited till he came quite close to her, then raised her eyebrows in calm surprise.

"I think you have made a mistake," she said.

Her surprise was so quietly and well acted, just that slight unemotional surprise that a trivial mistake would give rise to, that Dr. MacIlvert would have believed that she actually had failed to recognise him, had he not remembered the look of recognition that the sight of him had called up a year ago.

"No, no, I have not made a mistake," he said. "You were Mademoiselle du Clos, madame, and you and I transacted a little business together in the spring of 1882."

Madame Colomb stared coldly at him. "I fear I cannot call to mind having ever seen you before," she said, "but in any case the boy who admitted you made a mistake, for I do not receive any visitors to-day."

She made him a little bow of dismissal, and took up her paper.

The doctor applauded her *sangfroid*, but he was not so easily rebuffed. He took out of his pocket a fat, brown pocket-book. Anne remembered it of old, and thought, whimsically, how long it lasted and of what good leather it must have been made. He drew a letter out of it. It was a letter written in her own handwriting, and she knew what it contained perfectly well. Should she still deny that she had ever before set eyes on him? She ought to have typed her letters, and to have written under a feigned name! How extremely foolish she had been! If she stuck to her denial he would probably threaten to show that letter to Monsieur Colomb, and the old man would know her handwriting directly. Well, she was not afraid of poor old Félix, she had laughed at the idea of fearing him, but she did not like to think that the decency and conventionality of her married life might be wrecked! She hated scenes! She had taken such pains to avoid them. All these reflections flashed through her mind in far less time than it takes to read them.

"But you'll recall this to mind?" said the doctor.

He sat down near her. Though people were constantly passing in and out of the hall, he and she were practically *tête-à-tête* in that corner behind the marble pillar. He took the letter out of its worn envelope, and read it to her in that monotonous undertone, whose words only reach the person to whom they are addressed—

"SIR,—In reply to your letter of the 17th inst. I am the mother of the little girl described in the advertisement which you enclose. Circumstances make it advisable for me to part

with her. I do not intend to give up the name of the father. Since you wish to see me and the child on behalf of the lady for whom you are acting, I write to say that I am willing to receive you at the above address in St. Malo at any hour and day that you choose to appoint between the 21st and 27th of this month.

"Yours faithfully,
"ANNE DU CLOS."

The Anne of to-day seemed to see again the Anne Du Clos of that desperate time as the doctor read that letter, which had, for all its business-like curtness, cost her some pangs. It is always impressive to be brought face to face with one's old self. Whether one has become worse or better it is impressive. Anne listened intently. Monsieur Colomb had saved her from the necessity of ever again facing those demoralisingly hard times; she was not going to let the past rise up to overwhelm what peace they possessed.

"Yes, I recall writing that. Why do you come here?" she said.

Anne had always been a person who went straight to the point.

"I wished to renew our acquaintance," said he.

He did not like this Frenchwoman, though he had some admiration for her. She was as hard as nails, and he was a man who had always profited by the softness of women.

"For what reason?" she asked.

Her tone cut like a knife. She guessed that the reason was that he wanted hush-money, but she took a kind of fierce pleasure in making him say so, in so many words. Her contempt roused the devil in him.

"Well, well, it was a pleasant and profitable acquaintance (especially profitable to you) once," he said. "I helped you to get rid of the child comfortably and to the best advantage. Without my help the young lady would not have found herself in such a very well-lined nest. I have always found your sex grateful."

There was a shade of insolence in his manner, but that was

because her disdain had riled him and because it reminded him of Jeronime.

"What exact sum do you consider should represent the extent of my gratitude?" said Anne.

He looked at her for a moment and then laughed, that mellow, hearty laugh that had been of service to him on many occasions.

"What sum? I don't want and would not take a farthing from you! Are you under the impression that I am blackmailing you, my dear madame?"

Madame Colomb was momentarily nonplussed. Conscience, when it does not make cowards, is so apt to make fools of us all. He was pleased at her discomfiture; it helped him to regain the appearance of bluff and frank good-humour that had momentarily failed him.

"I don't mind telling you that my wife's banker has ruined her," he said. "I married the lady who brought up Miss Jeronime, as no doubt you've heard. The nest is not quite so prettily lined now as it was when that little bird grew fat and strong in it. It's a bad business. The fellow absconded, and to a place where we can't get at him, and don't at all wish to follow, for he blew his silly brains out! Now softness and pretty things are necessary to my wife (you remember her, don't you?) and I like 'em. I like 'em, though I've often had to do without them. How do you suppose I am going to provide necessary luxuries for her?"

"I am quite unable to guess," said Anne, with indifference.

"And you imply that you don't in the least care," said he cheerfully. "But there you make a mistake, you know; you *should* take an interest in your fellow-sinners. It doesn't do to be too indifferent. We can none of us afford it. We can't get on in this world without each other. One good turn calls for another. I want you to do something for *me* now, and I think you'll do it, I think you'll do it."

"Do you?" said Anne. She raised her head and looked him straight in the face. "It depends on what it is. I see that you hold that letter of mine. I committed a folly in putting pen to paper. *Eh bien*, one pays for follies, but I am

not inclined to pay too high a price. I am not afraid of you. If you do not want money, what is it that you want?"

"Oh, I do want money—I've said as much—but not out of your purse, certainly not," said he. "No, no, I am not that kind, I am not a bully."

A faint, ironical smile curved the corners of Anne's lips. Perhaps she thought neither was she that kind of woman. She was not so easily bullied.

"But though I will not go so far as to say I *cannot* dig," continued he pleasantly, and with a humorous glance at the reflection of his own broad shoulders in the mirror behind Anne, "I do not think that digging would provide necessary luxuries, and to beg I am ashamed. There is one thing I can do, and do far better than most men, and it is a pretty big thing too," he leant forward confidentially, and his face lit up with genuine enthusiasm. "Do you know what that is? I can always tell what is wrong with people. 'Ay, but can you cure them?' say you. Not always, not always, yet I believe I usually know where to shove, where to put my strength at the back of Nature's strength, and it's just that that tells. I've never in all my life made a mistake in diagnosis, and how many hundreds of sick people do you suppose I've judged? Ah, well, you'll say that's boasting, you won't believe it, perhaps—but it's true. You need study, you need your rule of thumb, mind you, but besides all that to be a first-rate doctor you must be *born* with the faculty in you. I am a born physician, whatever else I am or am not. That's as sure as that you were a born singer. My father tinkered souls and I tinker bodies, but the two go together. Oh, I've seen queer things. There is no confessional like a doctor's, and I'll tell you for why—it's because all kinds come to him sooner or later. The priests get women and the poor creatures with morbid consciences, but *we* get every sort and description under the sun. Naturally healthy as well as sick (for the healthiest may have an accident), saints and scoundrels, sane and mad. It's the finest profession in the world for the man who is interested in life. If I had my time to re-spend, starting with the experience I have now, I would still choose to be a doctor, though there are

some things I've done that I would not do over again. The world's pretty fairly divided between those who do that which they shouldn't do, and those who leave undone that which they should do. Have you noticed that? It's largely a matter of excess or deficiency of vitality. I belong to the first make. Now there was a thing I did wrong once, which has hampered me all my life since. It has clawed at me and pulled me down over and over again. It has prevented my making my way to the top of my profession. It has robbed me of the confidence which I naturally inspire. When I married I said to myself, 'I am a bit too high for that old folly to catch me now. I can snap my fingers at it.' But follies—or sins—which ever you choose to call 'em, have long arms, as we all know, as we all know, my dear madame, though if one's high enough up it makes a difference. What will starve and damn a nurserymaid looking for a place, for instance, won't pinch my lady! And I *was* high enough, but the rung of the ladder broke. It wasn't my fault that it broke, but I'm not going to sit on the ground and cry about it. I must buckle to and do the one thing I can do well again, and that's where you are going to help me."

"In what way do you hope that I may help you?" said Anne.

She was, despite her anger, interested. Perhaps the simile of the ladder, which had been her own simile, appealed to her. Perhaps something in this man's frank egotism and unblushing boldness was congenial.

"Why, you will give me introductions in Paris. You'll help my start," said he. "That's all I want of you, what's more it's all I would take of you, and it's only a fair return for what I once did for you. I'm no beggar. I should not ask even this, but that there is an unfortunate prejudice against me in England." His face was very grave for a second, when it was grave it showed deep and care-worn lines. No one, not even Lucilla, who had learned a good deal about him, knew quite how hard the struggle against that "unfortunate prejudice" had been. Then he said abruptly: "By the by, did you ever have any return of those nervous headaches?"

"No," said Anne. "It is extraordinary that you should

remember that I suffered in that way. You were very clever about them."

"Oh, I *am* clever, you know," he replied coolly, "and of course nervous disease is my special line. I don't mean to go in for a general practice. In less than a year from now you'll see that all the fashionable ladies in Paris will be flocking to my rooms in the Rue C——t."

"I can believe it. There are plenty of hysterical fools everywhere," said Anne.

"*You'd* never make a successful physician, my dear madame," said he. "Come, will you do it? Introduce ten cases to me, and I'll send you this and ask no more of you."

He tapped his pocket-book, and Anne's eyes seemed to narrow, as they always did when she was thinking hard over a doubtful point.

"I have no guarantee that you will play fairly; I do not know that you will not cheat me."

"No? Now it's funny, but I always know when an offer is made in good faith and when it's not," said he. "Look here, madame, I have never been afraid of backing my opinion at my own risk. I will put this letter in your hand, or in the fire—I should advise the fire—*now*, if you will give me your word of honour that you will do as I have asked you."

"And if I will not?" said Anne.

He was silent.

"You will put it into Monsieur Colomb's hand instead, I conclude." Her voice sounded sharp and eager in spite of herself, but she was not sure that she would not defy him.

"I don't say that. I don't threaten," and he slid the pocket-book back into his pocket.

Then all at once Anne felt that she should give way, that she must have that letter. It was on the cards that if he had said "I will go to your husband," she would have bidden him go. She was proud, and she had courage to fight a certainty, but uncertainty always unnerved her. She could not bear to feel that she was at this man's unmerciful mercy, and that the next move lay with him, but that she did not know what it might be. Yet she would not be hurried into a decision. She

was not impulsive by nature, and training had made her cautious.

"Supposing that I were to agree to help you," said she; "supposing that I were to recommend to you every one among my Parisian acquaintance who bores me by talking to me about her health, would you swear that you would do the poor things no harm?"

The question was a weak question, she despised herself for descending to it, but she was not prepared for the flash of genuine indignation that it evoked.

"My good lady, I'll swear nothing of the sort, for it is quite unnecessary," said the doctor. "Were our positions reversed, were you seeking for a fresh opening for your undoubted talent, were I in a position to give you such an opening, do you suppose that I should insult you by saying, 'But will you swear to me that you will not split our ears by false notes if I get you the chance of singing to a good audience?' To whose disadvantage would it be if you screamed like a peacock? The answer's obvious, eh? You'd say that answer was good enough for such a silly question. I think you wouldn't even try to explain to me what being a musician means, or that of all the ears in the hall yours would suffer the most."

Anne scrutinised him thoughtfully. She was aware that the fire of a genuine enthusiasm may sometimes burn, even in dirty places.

"If you had not held that letter over my head I would frankly beg your pardon, monsieur," said she, with some dignity. "But as it is, you have yourself to thank if I insulted you. For the rest, I refuse to be pressed or hurried; I must consider quietly before I either refuse or accede to your request. Give me your address, and I will let you know my decision in a week's time."

"That's wise, that's wise!" said he genially. "Shall we shake hands on it?"

"No, thank you," said Anne.

He shrugged his shoulders and took his hat.

"That is where you and your daughter resemble each other, and that is where, if you will forgive my saying so, you are *not* quite wise," said he.

CHAPTER XXV

It was Emma de Grouchy who played mother to Jeronime when the child was born. Jeronime had never lost the admiration and love for Mrs. de Grouchy that had seized her girlish imagination. Four months after Mr. Knight's death Emma received a terse, short appeal, that seemed to her the more piteous because of all it left unsaid. She telegraphed an acceptance and went to the Yellow House.

She found Jeronime far from well, and dazed by the suddenness of events.

Emma had set herself sternly to pay her husband's debt, but when that forlorn little figure met her (almost dumbly) in the big hall, she forgot whether she was debtor or creditor.

"Thank you very much for coming," Jeronime said later when her tongue was loosened. "If baby dies, and *I* die, the Yellow House is to go to the De Grouchy family."

"But, my dear, there is no need for either you or the baby to die!" cried Emma.

Jeronime had accompanied her to the guest-room, and the two women were alone together.

"I feel sure that I shall," said Jeronime, "but I don't mind."

Mrs. de Grouchy knew her obstinacy of old, and did not argue the point, but she sat long thinking over the situation. During the next few weeks she watched Jeronime quietly and her affection for her grew. The poor child had been overshadowed by the presence of Death, and had lived a life that had not been quite natural, despite all Mr. Knight's tenderness. Youth and birth had come to seem stranger, and their entrance less to be expected than that of their contraries!

One day Emma, in desperation, broke the ice between them, and put her arm round Jeronime as they stood together by the library window.

"What are you thinking of, my dear?" she said.

"Of Mr. Knight," said Jeronime simply, "and of how much I miss him, and of how kind, how very kind he always was to me."

"He must have been a good man, I am sure," said Emma. She had always acquitted Jeronime of mercenary motives, and now that he was dead she forgave Mr. Knight for that extraordinary marriage. "If he were here would he not tell you to go out and get what sunshine you can? You are indoors too much."

"He sat at this table by the window. He wrote his book on the De Grouchy family here. He liked to have me near him," said Jeronime.

Emma coloured with the immense effort she was making to speak unreservedly.

"But you are not one of those unhappy people who believe that the souls of those they love die with their bodies, are you?"

Jeronime shook her head, but looked slightly embarrassed, remembering Mr. Knight's warning against this good lady's papistry.

"Oh *no!* but you won't talk to me about purgatory, will you? for Mr. Knight would not have liked it."

Emma smiled. "Indeed I was not going to talk to you about my own faith. I was inquiring about yours. Since you believe that he is still alive, you surely also believe that he desires your welfare as much as ever. Was he not pleased that you expect a child?"

Jeronime nodded with tears in her eye.

"So pleased! Dear Mr. Knight! he was so very, very pleased!"

"Then do not disappoint him," said Emma. "My dear, do set your thoughts on life and not on death. You ought not to die! You have scarcely tasted what life means! If he knows anything of what passes here you may be sure he

does not wish you to dream of graves when you should be dreaming of cradles."

The words rang almost sternly. Jeronime stared for a moment, and then turned away like a chidden child and went out into the garden.

Very plain speaking suited her best, but she could not have answered Mrs. de Grouchy just them. And outside a voice she had loved and understood all her life spoke even more movingly. The wintry sunshine kissed her pale cheek. A robin trilled out suddenly a song of the spring that would yet come, the wind blew a last year's nest to her feet, sign that again the trees would rock nurseries full of gaping, hungry lives. There was a whisper all around her, a whisper of the strange and wonderful secret of teeming Mother Earth. Then all at once the healthy instinct, that strain and sorrow had only stunned for a time, reasserted itself, Jeronime felt her child stir, and guessed that life, not death, was calling her.

At one end of the garden was a chalk-pit, that had been planted with huge ferns, and whose sides were covered with undergrowth. Jeronime wandered there because she wished to be alone and out of sight of gardeners. The chalk-pit had been a safe hiding-place in her childhood, and there had been a delightful mystery about it in Jeronime's childish imagination. It had been a nook filled with surprises and possibilities, rather dark and awful (especially at dusk), but concealing sweet and wonderful treasures. The first violets, for example, were to be found there, and, in the autumn, bright crimson toad-stools, tiny and beautifully shaped, and delicate cup moss. Jeronime stood doubtfully looking at the path down into the chalk-pit; it was rather steep, and she feared to slip. As she stood there doubting, Mother Nature whispered again, and this time she knew of a certainty that she was going down into a strange and awful place, where she would learn the new things that are as old as heaven and earth, but that she would come up again into the sweet air and the sunlight, bearing her treasure with her.

The baby was born in winter. It was on a November day

that Emma brought the child, and laid her in the circle of Jeronime's arm.

"She is tiny! The wee-est thing I ever saw!" said Emma. "But the doctor says she is perfectly sound."

"*She?*" said Jeronime. Tears came into her eyes. "But dear Mr. Knight was so sure it would be a boy! We never even thought about a girl! He would have been so disappointed." She looked at the small creature lying against her, and the mother expression crept into her eyes. "But now I am glad after all—she—she *is* a great deal sweeter than any boy could be, isn't she? She is such a darling! I never fancied anything quite so dear."

From that moment her contentment seemed absolute, and Mrs. de Grouchy watched her healthy recovery with mingled pleasure and surprise. Her face dimpled again with tender smiles when she was able to play with her baby; she talked happy, loving nonsense; she even laughed.

"One should never be sad with a little dear baby," she said once, with the decision of a young mother. "It is bad for them to see sad faces. They must be all wrapped round with sunshine. Baby came into the world so solemn and careworn! She was like an old, old, tired-out person, weren't you, my sweet? But now she is getting younger every day! The wrinkles are filling out, and she sometimes smiles!"

Emma de Grouchy, whose life had been broken in half by her husband's death, and who lived the bigger half in the constant thought of him, could hardly comprehend this rebound.

"You are very brave," she said.

But Jeronime shook her head. "No! I am only very happy," she answered honestly. "I thought I was going to be sad all my life long, but—oh, look at baby now! Isn't she wonderful? Do you see how tight her wee fingers curl round my thumb? That shows she is going to be very persistent! She'll hold tight to what she's got. She has an immense deal of character already! I measured her again this morning, she is getting fat! I can't bear to miss one hour of her, you know, for she is a little bit different every hour, and one never can pick up what one has missed."

Though she had been an undemonstrative girl, she made love to her baby as naturally as any mother in the world, and Emma wondered if she had forgotten all her grief.

There were many inquiries after the young widow and child. Though Mr. Knight had lived like a recluse, and Jeronime had been unsociable, every one was interested in her now. It seemed strange enough that Miss Merridan's shy *protégée* should be the mistress of that great house!

Mrs. de Grouchy saw no one as a rule. Carriages drove up, and drove away again, and Emma kept the cards that were showered on Jeronime, to show her when she should be strong, and to use as a text for a sermon which she was minded some day to administer.

One lady was admitted. She came to the house a fortnight after the birthday of the child, and sent in her name with a note to Mrs. de Grouchy, in which she explained that she was the wife of a very old friend of Mr. Knight's, and that Jeronime had been married from her house. Emma willingly acceded to the request for further details about Jeronime; she was glad that here was one person who professed more than a slight aquaintance with her charge, whose lack of friends had impressed her seriously. Yet when Madame Colomb entered the room Emma was seized with an odd antipathy. The elegant, exquisitely dressed Frenchwoman seemed somehow inimical to her; she tried to be cordial, but only succeeded in being baldly polite.

Madame Colomb asked a few questions about Jeronime's health, and shrugged her shoulders on hearing that the baby was a girl.

"*Mais quel dommage!* with that place, and all that money!"

"I am too thankful that she is alive to quarrel with Heaven about her sex," said Emma.

"Indeed, it is seldom wise to quarrel with Heaven," agreed her visitor, and the conversation languished.

Anne longed to say that she wished to see the mother and baby, but was aware that the request would be considered bold, and hardly to be accounted for by Monsieur Colomb's lifelong friendship for Mr. Knight.

How did it come about that Mrs. de Grouchy of all people should be here? Did she guess whose child Jeronime was and tend her as a penance? A spasm of unexpected anger assailed Anne. She hated these unnatural saints who used their neighbours as steps on which to mount to heaven! She knew that it would be wise to go, but she stayed. So this was the wife of the man who had once been her own lover! Well, Mrs. de Grouchy could never have been beautiful, and Anne did not believe that she could have been loved. It was more than twenty years since De Grouchy had made love to her, and that episode belonged to another life, but she had not forgotten. It was a very impossible situation! Had he lived he would never have allowed his wife to be under the same roof with her. Anne laughed, and her laugh rang bitterly.

"Why do you laugh?" said Emma.

"Oh, I thought of something funny," Anne replied. "That girl upstairs is original, is it not so? She often said quaint things! She made my husband and myself to laugh very much sometimes. We grew to be fond of her. I do not always care about young girls, but I certainly grew to be fond of her."

"You were certainly very kind to her."

Anne's eyes narrowed. Again she was angered. That this woman should dare to tell her that she had been "kind" to her own child!

"Oh no! It is you who are kind, madame," she said suavely. "Jeronime was the *fiancée* of my husband's oldest friend, we could not do otherwise than befriend her while she was in Paris, but you only made her acquaintance on board the boat. She had no claim on you."

"She has a claim on me," said Emma.

She offered no further explanation. She wondered why they had both become rather excited. She rang the bell, and pressed her visitor to stay to tea, trying to speak lightly.

"You have a long drive before you. Of course you must have a cup of tea. Are you making much of a stay at Durham?"

"We stay but for a week. We arrived yesterday. Monsieur Colomb, he loves the Cathedral," said Anne.

She did not wish to accept hospitality at Mrs. de Grouchy's hands, but she stayed because she did not want to leave without having seen Jeronime. After tea she still lingered, and further accepted a sight of the baby. Emma had not fancied that this was the kind of woman to care about babies; she had suggested a visit to the nursery tentatively, and merely because their conversation either languished or showed a strange tendency to become strained.

Madame Colomb hardly concealed her dismay at sight of the small, wizened creature in the cradle.

"What a little misery! She is terribly undersized and delicate! It was not so that her mother looked," she exclaimed.

"Perhaps not, but in one respect she is more fortunate. *This* baby's mother loves her," said Emma.

Anne could have bitten her tongue out. Never in all her life before had it slipped so badly. Had Mrs. de Grouchy suspected something? She could not tell. When they left the nursery Madame Colomb glanced at the opposite door.

"That is her bedroom, is it not?"

"Yes."

"If one were to go in very softly, and look just for one minute at the little mother? That would hardly disturb her?"

"I fear that it might," said Emma. "She is going on well, but she is a little tired this afternoon, and is to see no one but the nurse and myself, to whom she has become accustomed, and who are not exciting people."

For a second Anne looked strangely at the other woman, almost (Emma thought) as if she intended to defy her. Then she nodded brightly, and picked up her conventional manner, as she might have picked up a cloak that had half-slid from her shoulders.

"Yes, yes; you are very wise, madame," and she ran quickly downstairs, and into the great hall.

Here she paused. "And if I were to come again at

the very end of our stay in Durham? On the morning of the last day?"

"Oh, I think she could see you then," said Emma. "It is very good of you to take so much trouble."

"Why do you——?" said Anne.

She turned suddenly and faced Mrs. de Grouchy; there was a note of passion in her voice, but Emma's quiet dignity seemed to restrain her.

"Why do I come to the hall door with you? I want to make sure that you have warm wraps in the carriage, madame," said Emma gently. "It is cold, is it not? I will tell Jeronime that you are coming again to see her."

She saw Madame Colomb drive off, and lingered for a while on the broad, gravelled drive.

"Why do I? Why do I, indeed?" she said. "You left me many debts, dear, and some beyond my paying."

It was cold, but like Jeronime, she sought refuge out of doors when she was troubled or perplexed. A star pierced the pale, wintry sky. It would be dark by the time that Frenchwoman reached Durham. Then some one else came through the gates. Emma was about to turn indoors, when she saw that the newcomer was Quentin Mavis, and went instead to meet him. Last time she had seen Quentin he had been whirling away in a haze of heat and dust down a hot French road, with burning hot anger and disappointment in his heart. She had felt sorry for the boy then, but now directly he spoke to her she felt that he had grown older, he was not in the very least a boy any more.

"Mrs. Knight will be pleased to hear that you have called to ask after her. She told me one day that she considered it a wonderful treat when she was allowed to play with your sisters when she was a little girl. That does not seem so long ago, does it? Will you not come in to the fire?" said Emma kindly.

Quentin shook his head, with his kind, pleasant smile.

"I am glad she is all right. No, I won't come in, thank you. I never meant to do that. I am glad she has you to take care of her."

Then suddenly, as if he had felt her eyes on him, he glanced up at a window where Jeronime stood for a second, dressed in a blue dressing-gown, with a glow from the nursery fire behind her, and with her baby in her arms. She was like the vision of a little Madonna, Quentin thought, as pure and gentle and as far removed from him. A hand drew her away from the window, it was too cold for her to be allowed to stand there, and pulled down the blind.

"Do come in," Emma repeated. But, no; he did not want to enter that door. He had grudged the master of the Yellow House the wealth which had appeared able to compass altogether too much, and now that master lay in a smaller house than that of any cottager in the estate, and Quentin was ashamed of the grudge.

"You see, I used to think Mr. Knight was too awfully rich and—and lucky," he said.

Emma understood. "So did I," she owned. "But he might have been a Crœsus, and if he hadn't also been Mr. Knight she would never have married him."

"I know, I know," said Quentin. Strangely enough he knew because he had seen Jeronime's face as she stood at the window.

One day there arose a question about the christening.

"What shall you name your baby?" Mrs. de Grouchy asked.

They were sitting in the nursery. The sun, pouring into the pleasant room, touched the baby's downy head as it nestled against Jeronime's breast, and illumined the peacefulness of her expression.

"Why, *of course*," said she, "there is only one name by which I could ever think of calling my baby. She will be christened 'Thomasina.'"

"Thomasina!" echoed Emma faintly. "But, my dear, is it not rather an ugly name?"

"No, it is a very nice name," answered Jeronime. "Next to Thomas it is the nicest name in all the world."

A tear splashed suddenly on to the baby's frock, but she hastily wiped it away.

"I won't cry over his last present to me," she said. "He gave me so many presents, but this is the last and the best."

They were both silent for a few minutes, then—"If you would be one of Thomasina's godmothers I should be very glad," Jeronime said. "You see, you are the right person for a godmother, because you are so good."

"But, my dear, baby will not be of my Church. I cannot be her godmother."

Jeronime failed to see why the difference of creed should matter, but was forced finally to accept the refusal.

"Though I should have thought *any one* might like to be baby's godmother, when she is such a darling!" she remarked.

"Who else did you think of asking," said Emma.

Jeronime hesitated a moment.

"Why, I have been thinking about godmother. But I am not quite sure about that. You see, Mr. Knight was very angry and shocked when poor godmother married that dreadful doctor, and he never could forgive either of them for something that happened just before she became engaged to him. It is such a long story, I can't tell it all now, but I believe that Dr. MacIlvert did a kind of sleight-of-hand trick, and somehow made it appear that I had hidden a brooch of godmother's in my own workbox. I don't think that poor godmother really believed that I had done such a wicked thing, but she could not bear to sift the matter. She just shirked it, you know, because she was in love with the doctor. Mr. Knight stood fast by me, and he never forgot that evening, nor wished me to see godmother ever again after I was married. I was sorry for that, and now I often think about godmother. She had a great deal of trouble with me, and I was a very slow, stupid, disappointing kind of child. I never was the least comfort to her, and I was often horrid. Now that I am not a child I can understand what poor godmother felt and wanted much better. Baby has taught me lots of things that I never guessed at before. I do not like to do what Mr. Knight would disapprove (that's the difficulty),

but for my own part I want to ask godmother to stand sponsor for my baby. Perhaps she would not do it, but it would show her that I have not forgotten. There is nothing so dreadful as to forget and desert people. Do you think Mr. Knight would mind—perhaps he isn't so angry *now?*"

Emma shook her head, feeling, perhaps, that that question was quite beyond her answering.

"Mr. Mavis tells me that the MacIlverts were very hard hit indeed by the failure of Parkyns and White," she said, "and that Hollowdene did not sell so well as they expected. He saw Mrs. MacIlvert on business the other day, and seemed quite distressed to find her in very poky lodgings."

"Godmother! In poky lodgings!" cried Jeronime. "I will write to her now, at once. How horrid—how perfectly heartless and horrible she must have thought me!"

She got up quickly, but her intentions were, after all, frustrated.

"There is that Frenchwoman again," cried Emma, going to the window at the sound of wheels. "You were asleep when she came before, and I would not wake you, but she is evidently determined to see you!"

Jeronime flushed pink.

"Oh, let her come up here to me," she cried. "I want to show my baby to her. I want very much to see her.

She was evidently excited. She was not quite her normal, sturdy self yet.

Anne greeted Mrs. de Grouchy with her brilliant smile, and with a hint of that antipathy which lay between them like a sharp two-edged sword, which neither would stoop to openly pick up and unsheath.

"Jeronime has not been allowed to have many visitors, yet," said Emma, "but since you are an old friend, I will leave her to you for an hour—she must not talk too long."

"Ah, you are very good, madame. It was, however, my husband who was the old friend of Mr. Knight," corrected Anne.

"Maman!" cried Jeronime, when Emma had gone, "I am very tired of lies, aren't you? And it isn't worth while to tell them to Mrs. de Grouchy, for she knows the truth."

"You told her? Then you did very wrong!" cried Anne energetically.

"No," said Jeronime. "I didn't tell her. I love her, and I saw that she guessed. Maman, my baby is so wonderful. Do look at her. Poor Maman, you must have been so miserable when you let me go. *Now* I know! I sat on your knee, and your eyes reminded me of transparent pebbles shining through a salt pool. So hard and bright! Poor Maman!"

Anne sat down by Jeronime's rocking-chair; her expression softened as she looked at the mother and child. Jeronime was far more beautiful than she had been, the girlish purity of her face was transfigured by her joy in the new miracle.

"No, you do not know," said Anne. "Now see, I will own now that I made a mistake. I had better have kept my child. I was angry and bitter because I had been set on fire, and the fire had burnt out and left dry ashes, You have never been set on fire, *mon enfant*, you do not know how one feels—afterwards. The good Mr. Knight could not do *that*, though he was not so old but that he felt the flames himself."

"Hush, Maman!" said Jeronime.

"That was a hundred years ago! That time when I let you go! You cannot understand how I could do it?"

Jeronime shook her head.

"And you never will. There is a great gulf fixed, like the great gulf in the Gospel, between the people who have been set on fire and the people who haven't. Ah—baby has on the robe I made! It is very pretty, is it not? I do not imagine that Miss Merridan taught you to do such fine needlework. That is a thing that is not properly taught in England."

"I hated sewing," said Jeronime. "I was clumsy with a needle, but that was not godmother's fault. Oh, Maman, is it not terrible? Godmother has lost all her money, and I do not even know where to address a letter to her. I have lost sight of her since I married."

"Be consoled, since they have lost all their money, you are sure to hear of your friends again," Anne remarked drily.

Jeronime coloured.

"If Dr. MacIlvert is anything to me, he is my enemy. He is certainly not my friend. If godmother has lost her money, he has most likely deserted her by this time, and in that case Mr. Knight would wish me to try to make friends with her again."

Anne laughed.

"But your enemy's methods are not so crude. He has not deserted his wife; on the contrary, he assured me, but a few days ago, that he was intent on procuring 'necessary luxuries' for her."

Confidence was a rare and not at all a "necessary luxury" to Anne, but for once she was inclined to indulge in it. She presently gave Jeronime a succinct account of the scene between herself and the doctor at the hotel.

"He was not blackmailing me, but no!" she said, "he would not touch a penny of mine, only I was to send my acquaintance to him, and after all, why not? He was not threatening me, oh no! but—well, the letter remains in his pocket."

"Maman! Don't give in to him. Don't help him. Why, how can you?" cried Jeronime. "It is like sending people to Satan. He might poison them! A man who can do one wicked thing can do another."

"You are a good hater (in that you take after me), but you are still a very foolish child," said Anne.

"I hate Dr. MacIlvert because he is bad. It is right to hate wickedness with all one's might and to fight it as hard as one possibly can," Jeronime declared with absolute simplicity. "I would not allow any poor sick person to be sent by you to that dreadful man if I could prevent it, Maman."

She sat bolt upright, with a flushed face and blazing eyes. She was much more easily moved to emotion now than she had been when she was a girl. Anne, who, to tell the truth, had given no very serious consideration to the "poor sick people," regretted having yielded to that unusual impulse of confidence.

"It was ridiculous of me to tell you this story. Forget it," she said.

"I cannot. I shall never forget it," cried Jeronime. "Maman, do write and tell him that nothing will persuade you to make a bargain with him. Defy him, and tell Monsieur Colomb everything. Oh, *do!* Why, he might—he might hurt some poor tiny baby," and she clasped her own tighter.

"Whatever he is, he isn't a fool or a madman. He won't do that."

But there was no getting Jeronime away from the subject; she was obstinately and unreasonably miserable over the procession of mothers and babies whom she pictured beguiled into the doctor's clutches. Anne became impatient at last.

"You make Dr. MacIlvert into a kind of bogey, Jeronime," she said. "He is not a particularly good man, any more than" (with a hard little laugh), "*I* am a particularly good woman, but in all probability he is no monster. It is not likely that he murders innocents for fun. He has even, I believe, an enthusiasm for his profession. I suppose it is your English blood that inclines you to fancy that an ordinary rogue is an impossible Guy Fawkes of the streets. No other nation has a Guy Fawkes Day. It amused me yesterday to see the ugly carnival in Durham."

"But don't have any more to do with that man, Maman."

Anne rose with a hasty exclamation, but Jeronime caught her gown and held her fast. "Oh, I know I make you impatient, I know I can't say the right thing, and that I am not clever, but you might get over that since I am your daughter."

"You are the most tenaciously obstinate daughter that ever was born!" cried Anne. "Now listen to me, for I tell you the truth. It is not fear, nor selfishness, nor any bad motive that makes me inclined to do what your bogey, your Guy Fawkes, asks of me, but a quite reasonable view of the case. I have said that I was not particularly good. I could never have been a saint like your Madame de Grouchy, but neither was I a light woman. If your father had been true to me, I should have been as faithful to him as any wife to any husband. I did not know (till too late) that he had a wife.

After he left me I never had the faintest inclination to step out of the beaten track again; though many men admired me, my pulse never beat quicker for one of them. Since I married Monsieur Colomb I have been (but it is absurd and unnecessary even to say it!) without reproach. Then you must surely see that to uncover that old scandal would throw an entirely false colour over my character. It would make Monsieur Colomb unhappy; it would also enrage him. But it is not his anger that I think most of. Without me he would be extremely uncomfortable, especially when he has an attack of gout. At such times I am much needed. Without him I should no doubt find my life empty enough. I have done my best for a great many years. It would be sheer waste to allow myself to be undone now. And when all is said, Dr. MacIlvert asks me only to promise to advertise him. When he has my promise he will give me back my letter. If he does not send me my letter, I, of course, will not fulfil the promise."

"If you have made any promise, let us buy it back," said Jeronime eagerly. "With him it can only be a question of getting money enough. Luckily I am rich——"

"*Un*luckily, if you suggest making so silly a use of your riches!" said Anne sharply. "I've made no promise yet, but I'd rather sell my soul than let you pay a penny to Dr. MacIlvert on my account! Do you suppose I have no self-respect left? You talk nonsense!"

"I wish that you would have no more to do with him, Maman."

"I wish that I could make you see more than one side of a question."

But Jeronime's hand still clung to Anne's skirt.

"Maman, you have always such good reasons for what you do. You had good reasons long ago when you gave me away to Miss Merridan."

"I had," said Anne. "It was perhaps a mistake, so far as my own happiness was concerned; I have already owned as much."

"Baby is crying," said Jeronime. She let go Anne's dress,

to rock the child in her arms. "I cried very loud when you left me with strangers, *that* was not reasonable at all," she said. "But all the same you have often been sorry you left me. You might make up by giving me what I want now, Maman, *do*."

"There is no use in talking to you, especially while that child is making such a noise," said Anne. "Goodbye, Jeronime. Get strong and do not dream of that bogey, that devourer of innocents!"

She kissed Jeronime and so left her, with the voice of the baby's wailing in her ears. It was foolish, of course, but during the long drive back to Durham it seemed to her that she was never beyond the reach of that sound, and a battle was raging in her heart again. There was never any one so ridiculous as Jeronime! and she had thought that she had done with battles long, long ago.

CHAPTER XXVI

LUCILLA sat in a dreary furnished apartment, that was situated in one of the dreary side streets in the vicinity of the Vauxhall Road, and turned many ideas over in her mind.

She had been taken very ill on the day that followed that terrible evening when she had fainted after dinner, and when she had stood by the window shivering and fearing, and waiting for her husband's return.

She had had a sharp attack of pneumonia, and all the urgent business that had to be settled, the comparative poverty that had to be faced, the apparently pressing difficulties of life, had been just brushed aside by the approach of that most primitive of all dangers, the danger of Death. She considered herself perfectly well now, that illness was a thing of the past, but it had left her rather languid, rather glad to take an opportunity to sit with her hands idle on her lap and rest.

Quentin Mavis had been to see her on business, and had been touched and shocked and indignant at finding her in these modest lodgings. Miss Merridan had been such a very magnificent person. Her very foibles and extravagances had had a sort of splendid halo round them. Now she did not look splendid any more, but worn and ill, and with an indescribable difference in manner that made that kind little gentleman angry and unhappy.

"It can't be only the loss of her money. It's that brute of a doctor!" he said to himself.

He had not altogether liked her before her marriage, but he was exceedingly chivalrous. He glared fiercely at Dr. MacIlvert, who was immensely amused by the interview. Lucilla had detained him a moment after he had got up to go.

"I should like to tell you," she said, "that my dear husband warned me not to leave my securities in the hands of Mr. Parkyns. If I had followed his advice all this loss would not have happened."

"No one could possibly have known that Parkyns and White weren't sound," said Quentin. "Don't blame yourself, Miss Merridan—Mrs. MacIlvert, I mean. It is bad enough that you should have been swindled, without being blamed into the bargain."

When he had gone Dr. MacIlvert had laughed merrily.

"He believes that I bully you dreadfully, Lucy! You'd better stick to little Mavis. He's a nice, honest little chap, and he's so sorry for you that he'll do your work cheap, I'm sure. But why did you tell him that just now?

"Because I want people to know that it wasn't your doing," she had said. "Wallace, do you know I wished so much once that it had been *you* who had done something foolish with that money, but now I am glad it was not you. I couldn't bear people to say it was your fault."

"Oh, well, I'm *not* foolish, you know!" he had replied cheerfully. "Not even foolish enough to lose my temper with you because the milk's spilt, eh?"

Lucilla, as she turned her experiences over, recognised that that was quite true. Her doctor was most philosophical. Since that evening when he had first learnt the news, he had never reproached her. Certainly it had been her own money to begin with, but then it had practically become his, and Lucilla was anxious to make the most of his magnanimity. And in many respects he had shown to great advantage since their misfortunes. He was an excellent nurse, as well as a clever doctor, and he had done his best for Lucilla. The man's instinct was to fight disease, and when he was engaged in that battle he could be untiring and gentle, as well as skilful. Lucilla liked to aver that she should certainly have died if he had not been with her. She liked, also, to see his virtues through a magnifying glass; they were a refuge from his vices and gave her courage. For out of her mad infatuation for this man, out of her terrified shrinking from much that

was bad in him, out of the experiences she had gone through, a something that was neither bad nor mad was formed. She had been doubtless a very silly woman, but she was learning from life now, though life drives lessons home with such a very sharp point that it was no wonder she sometimes shrank.

The doctor had left her with a cheerful recommendation not to worry, but for once she did not obey him, for she worried a good deal. Not, however, about the loss of money, for she had not, as he sometimes observed, the faintest conception of what real poverty entails.

"That may be a pleasure to come," he had once rather grimly remarked, but had added almost immediately, "But not if I can prevent it! Poverty is not a bad tonic for young people, when not in too strong a dose, but it wouldn't suit you, my dear; you are too old to benefit by it."

It had indeed been quite a modified dose, but to a woman who had had the spending of fifteen thousand a year, and never found it a penny too much, it was at least extraordinary to be in lodgings instead of an hotel, and to have no maid at her call. The selling of Hollowdene would bring in something, and in the meanwhile the doctor made shift to get along as comfortably as might be. Lucilla forbore to grumble at their rooms, though they appeared to her very small and shabby indeed, whereas her husband, who could see in his mind's eye certain places where he had once been thankful to get a bed, smiled sometimes at her conscious heroism.

"It's all a matter of comparison," he had said, "like everything else in the world—virtue and vice included. I always have known it to be all a matter of comparison, but never so well as since I married you."

Lucilla had wondered then whether he too had learnt a few lessons from their marriage. She, poor soul, had learnt so much that she felt like the woman in the nursery rhyme, who fell asleep upon the King's highway.

> "And there came a pedlar whose name was Stout,
> He cut her petticoats all round about
> He cut her petticoats up to her knees,
> Which made the little woman to shiver and freeze.

When the little woman began to awake,
She began to shiver and she began to shake,
She began to shake, and she began to cry,
Lawk-a-mercy on me! *this is none of I.*"

"This is none of I," was what Lucilla constantly felt now. She did not even pride herself any longer on her business capabilities, but let the management of her affairs slip entirely into the doctor's hands. After the departure of Quenton Mavis he had proceeded to explain his proposed enterprise to her.

"Now you listen to my scheme, and cheer up, Lucy! We won't be beaten, I can tell you; a man who's got a little lump of capital in his palm is a fool if he can't double it! It's the start without any capital that is the difficulty."

His hopefulness and resourcefulness were cheering; Lucilla wistfully admired them as he unfolded his plan of action. A great deal of money was to be spent on various forms of advertisement, which, however, were not to appear as advertisements at all, and quite a large sum was to be risked on fitting up rooms in the Rue C——t and in hiring men-servants.

"It's really safer to begin with a good splash," he said. "And we can raise money on Hollowdene. It will be more than enough."

"But if you fail, then we shall be really beggared?"

"I shan't fail," he said, and then vouchsafed a further explanation. "I should not dare to try Paris without introductions. Madame Colomb is going to advertise me a bit! She knows a great many very rich people. Once floated I shall do! You and I don't want a modest competence, we want plenty, my love!"

Lucilla smiled faintly. "It is you who want plenty, Wallace. But Madame Colomb? that is the name of the lady whom little Joy stayed with in France. You never said that she was an acquaintance of yours."

"I came across her in Paris and recognised an old friend. I never forget faces."

"Why should she take so much trouble for you?" said Lucilla quickly.

His eyes twinkled. "Because she is so fond of me! People *are* fond of me, Lucy! But you need not be jealous, for she is not the kind of woman I like."

"If you do not like her, you certainly ought not to accept favours from her. Nothing would ever induce me to accept a favour from a person I disliked."

"I daresay that's so," said he good-temperedly; "but this is my business, my dear."

"But you must see that I am right, surely?" she cried eagerly.

She had not quite relished the elaborately concealed methods of advertising, nor several of the clever and rather amusing details of his adventures, but had held her tongue, for the fact that she invariably got the worst of an encounter with him had taught her some caution. Now, however, the entrance of a Madame Colomb on the scene was so antipathetic that she ceased to be cautious.

"I can't bear all this scheming! It has a savour of quackery! I can't agree with you always, Wallace. I have never been a nonentity, you know. I have all my life had my own ideas and said what I chose and done what I liked."

"With charming results," said he drily. His glance round the room just pointed his remarks, and she winced.

He held out his hand to her, with a smile.

"No, no, I didn't mean to be nasty, Lucy, but now that we are at such close quarters we must understand each other. There was room at Hollowdene for any number of whims, but furnished apartments don't allow for much divergence, eh? I've got to do the best I can for us both, and you must follow my lead. It's like this, d'you see, my dear? When you are a first-class passenger on board an Atlantic liner, you can go for nice little excursions about the deck, and you can play the piano in the saloon, and you can waltz round in the evening, and no one will be the worse; indeed, every one will be the better for the added variety you'll give to life. Yes, I'll go so far as to allow that, even if you occasionally get in the way, every one will be the better for it! But when you and the captain find yourselves together in a cockle-shell of a boat, in

a very choppy sea, with every prospect of going to the bottom if you don't sit tight, why, then there's no room for vagaries, you must do as he tells you, eh? It won't do for you to try and pull one way while I'm steering another way, and we don't want to quarrel! I'm not a bad-tempered captain, am I, Lucy? Come, you know a good many men would have cut up much rougher than I did over the Parkyns affair, yet I don't believe you'd like the results if you were to upset the boat."

Lucilla twisted her fingers together nervously. Her illness had left her nervous, and she knew that she wouldn't like the results.

"But bless you! there's nothing to look tragic about." "Before we are many years older you shall be on the Atlantic liner again, and then I promise you you shall have as many whimsies as ever you please. And upon my word, Lucy, no one will be better pleased than I shall be to see you in your proper surroundings again."

With that he had patted her shoulder and told her "not to worry," and in spite of his injunction her head was aching with the effort to sort her opinions and sensations, her hopes and fears. She was relieved to be interrupted by a knock at the door, but surprised when a maid brought up a card with Madame Colomb's name on it.

"Madame Colomb. Why does she come to see me? I do not know her!" said Lucilla, but her curiosity overcame a slight premonition of disturbance, and she added, "But show her up."

She did know her! Directly Anne entered the room Lucilla recognised her. Lucilla had not so infallible a memory as her husband had, but Anne's personality was striking, and they had disliked each other at first sight. Anne saw she was remembered.

"Ah, you recollect?" she said. "You are as clever as monsieur your husband, madame."

"Dr. MacIlvert told me that he had met you in Paris this summer; he has a very good memory for faces," said Lucilla.

He had not told her that Madame Colomb was the mother of Jeronime, but there was no need to mention that.

"Will you not sit down?" she said.

She did not like her visitor; she was angry that the woman should have ventured to call on her, but she had an uneasy desire to know what was Madame Colomb's object in coming, and perhaps, having just listened to that little exposition of Dr. MacIlvert's views, she was rather afraid of making any move that might, as he had put it, upset the boat.

Madame Colomb sat down, and looked quietly around her.

"It is a great while ago now—that day when I left to you my child," she said. "I was wrong, and you were wrong, madame. You promised me that she should be 'first in your affections,' but it was not so, I think! There is something stronger than our intentions, is it not so? Another woman's child could not come first in your affections, and I could not put the little stupid thing out of my thoughts. I could not really give, nor you really receive! That is a thing we learn as we live."

Lucilla would once have indignantly repudiated these statements, but the stern "cannots" of life had come home to her too of late.

"I meant to be everything to Jeronime," she murmured.

Anne shrugged her shoulders. "But *everything?* Perhaps you began with too great exaltation."

"Do you come here to reproach me?—*you!*" asked Lucilla.

That would be a trifle too much, she thought, for if she had not been all she had once meant to be to Jeronime, if even there had been moments when she had become tired of her, yet she had at least done better for the child than had the real mother.

"No, madame, I accuse only myself! Jeronime shouted and cried when I left her behind me. *Almost* I went back again and said to you, 'After all I will keep my own child,' but I did not do it. I would not be so silly! Often since I have wished I had been sillier. Now again she insists; she is absurd—but because I did not listen once, perhaps this time I will listen to her."

"What does she want of you now that should bring you here to me?" said Lucilla.

She was very much puzzled. She could not imagine what Jeronime's insistence had to do with her.

Anne paused a moment, not in hesitation, but in order that she might translate her meaning as clearly as possible into good plain English.

"She wants of me that I should make no bargain with your husband, madame. He has said that he will send back to me that letter he holds of mine, if I will give him my promise to send many excellent rich patients to him in Paris.

"I do not understand you," said Lucilla. "Your letter can have no connection with my husband's patients."

"But of course you understand!" cried Anne impatiently.

It seemed to her that Mrs. MacIlvert was wasting time over this pretence! It was impossible that she did not know the doctor!

"It was a letter which I wrote to him when it was first proposed that you should have Jeronime. It is a letter which compromises me, which I naturally do not wish that he should carry always in his pocket-book. If you will so far help me, madame, as to get for me that letter, I will——"

"You insult him and me!" interrupted Lucilla; she rose to her feet as if to end the interview. "You have absolutely failed to comprehend what Dr. MacIlvert said to you. He asked you, of your courtesy, to grant him a very slight favour. Had you acceded to his request you would also have done your friends a kindness, for there is no cleverer doctor in Europe than he. He certainly had no intention of threatening you. If he mentioned the letter which you wrote to him long ago, it was merely in order to—to recall himself to your mind. Every one has not his memory. If he has not already destroyed your letter, it will certainly be either burnt or returned to you when he comes in. There is no other 'if' about it. You have made a most extraordinary mistake, madame."

"I could not have made a mistake," Anne began; but then checked herself and altered her tone. She knew that she had not misunderstood that plausible gentleman, he had made his meaning plain enough; but here, perhaps, was the best

chance of getting that letter back, and getting it back for nothing!

"If I have been mistaken, madame, and the letter arrives, or you swear to me that you yourself have seen it utterly destroyed, I will own I was mistaken, and I will most humbly apologise to you."

Lucilla bowed with flushed face and bright, proud eyes.

"Oh, that will be unnecessary. You will hear from me to-morrow, and I do not require an apology—only it is better not to imagine these impossibilities."

Madame Colomb could not prolong the strange interview. She took her leave with no apparent embarrassment, leaving Lucilla to what satisfaction can be got out of the last word.

"Does the poor lady believe in his impeccability? or is she too proud to own that she has married a rascal, and shall I get my letter back?" Anne asked herself. "If I do, will *she* pay for it?"

She had hated the rich Miss Merridan to whom she had given her child, but she did not hate the doctor's wife, she was even rather sorry for her.

"Anne," said a voice behind her. She turned sharply, and Monsieur Colomb hobbled up to her.

"What do you do here? Whom do you visit secretly—you, who tell me you have no friends in London?" he panted.

"I have no friends. I called on a lady with whom I had an acquaintance years ago, before I married, before I made my name as a singer!"

"A lady? but what lady?" cried the old man. "Why have I never heard of her?"

"Why do you follow me? Why do you torture yourself with mad suspicions?" said Anne wearily. She felt very tired indeed. "I give you my word, Félix, that I have spoken to no one since I left you, excepting a fine big policeman of whom I asked the way, and of whom you may, if you please, be jealous, for I admired him immensely, and——"

"And who else?" he demanded sharply.

"And to a most unhappy woman," said Anne gravely.

She spoke with unusual feeling, and Monsieur Colomb was ashamed of his suspicions.

"Unhappy is she? Poor soul, poor soul! But there are plenty of unhappy ones in the world! You and I, *we* are not always so very happy, are we, Anne?"

CHAPTER XXVII

DR. MACILVERT had had a busy day, and he turned his steps homewards rather late. He was wonderfully cheerful considering the tremendous loss he had lately sustained. The fact was that the prospect of setting up in Paris exhilarated him. He had been glad enough to be in safety and peace for a time, but he had too much energy to luxuriate for long in idleness; and though he liked creature comforts, his tastes were not of a kind that require a million of money for their adequate satisfaction. He felt, too, that he had behaved so much better than any one would have suspected! Certain rough experiences had embittered and rasped him. In spite of a pretty tough skin he had occasionally winced at the way in which most honest men regarded him. It was a new sensation, and not unpleasant, to feel that some one who adored him waited for him at home. And that in itself was such a highly respectable sentiment!

He laughed at himself as he tasted its respectability.

"Poor Lucy! I've always known how to manage her," he reflected. "Some, indeed most people, wouldn't have managed her so well!"

The doctor was one of those somewhat deceptively genial people who have an excellently good temper over small rubs, (which try most of us) but are arbitrary at bottom, and unexpectedly unforgiving where they have been practically thwarted. Lucilla's cranks and fancies had never ruffled her husband. Her ways would have maddened some men, but he had never minded them in the least. She might weep over trifles, and he would remain cheerful and serene, she might be high-flown and his common sense would be unjarred, lacka-

daisical and he would be bracing or consolatory as the case required. Her variable moods never in the least disturbed his robust nerves. He reckoned her vagaries as part of a feminine stock-in-trade, and told himself that he had known just the sort of woman Lucilla was when he married her, and that on the whole they agreed uncommonly well. Yet after all it was possible that he did not quite know!

It was dark when he entered their sitting-room. Lucilla was sitting staring into the fire.

"Poof!" said the doctor, "the room is stuffy, Lucy! You sit indoors too much, you know! How have you been?"

"Wallace," said Lucilla, without looking up, "Madame Colomb has been to see me."

"The devil she has! What did she do that for?" said he.

Lucilla did not reply at once and he repeated the question in another form.

"What had she to say to you?"

He was annoyed with Madame Colomb. He really would have preferred that Lucilla should not have been told about the pressure he had brought to bear. He was not much ashamed of it himself, but he quite recognised that his standard and a fine lady's standard were of different heights. Lucilla usually approached a hot subject in a roundabout way, but now she went quite straight to the point. Tragedy is simple and direct, and this was a tragic enough matter to her.

"She said to me that you have a compromising letter of hers—the letter which she wrote to you about her child."

"So I have," said he,

"She said that you tried to bargain with her. Was that true?"

"I never asked Madame Colomb for a penny."

"But the introduction to possible patients, Wallace? You didn't mean to get them out of her by threatening to keep her letter? You didn't surely? She fancied that. Say that she fancied that."

She spoke with wistful eagerness, but he did not lie to her this time. She was his wife now, and since she had been his wife he had never thought it worth while to do that.

"Oh, the introductions. Well, I *did* insist a bit there," he said. "It won't do her any harm, my dear. If she had not as little gratitude as this poker there would have been no need for me to put on the screw! She should have been delighted to give me a hand. I never did her anything but good."

"But she is not delighted, and she knows now that we did not do her good! Wallace, you mustn't hold that letter over her. I can't bear it! It is the kind of thing that your enemies would expect you to do. I never liked Madame Colomb, and you know very well that I love you, but I want you to return that letter to her to-night."

"Well, I won't do that, Lucy, so it is no use wanting," said he.

He poked the fire into a blaze. The cheerful, comfortable light flickered over their faces, touching his reddish beard and shining on her eager, anxious eyes and twitching lips. He waxed slowly angry with Madame Colomb, as he had once waxed angry with Jeronime.

"I don't know that I'd have given it back to her if she had asked me for it on her knees, but she hasn't done that. She's chosen to try to bully me through you, and I'm damned if I won't make it hot for her now!"

"Don't! That's such a fearful thing to say!" cried Lucilla. "Wallace, I swore to her that she was utterly wrong, that she was insulting you, that she had made an atrocious mistake. I assured her that she imagined an impossibility, that you would of course return that letter to her at once."

"And did you believe yourself, my dear," he said, "or did she believe you? No, no, she knew better! She's not quite so silly as all that." He was, to all appearance, unmoved to any shame on the subject, but perhaps he did not altogether like the situation, for he broke out the next moment with some heat. "And good gracious, Lucy! why do you make such a fuss about it? Who in the world is the worse off if that woman (who is as hard as the fire irons) *is* urged a trifle strongly to do me a good turn?"

"Who? Why *you*—you are the worse for it," she cried, "and so am I, who am your wife. If you can make use of a

letter that a woman wrote to you in confidence, and when she was pushed by poverty, what is there that you will stick at? The thing is impossible. I don't see that any crime can be much worse than that."

She trembled and turned rather white, not because she was afraid of his anger at that moment, for the doctor always refused to get angry over mere words, which "broke no bones," but because she was thinking of certain stories that had been told against him—of other things which she did not wish to believe possible.

"Well, I shouldn't worry myself about it if I were you," he said. "I'm afraid you're forgetting about the boat, Lucy! Don't stamp about! There isn't room for it just yet."

The stamping was purely metaphorical, for Lucilla was sitting very still. She looked into the fire again for a long time quite silently.

"Have you really got the letter in your pocket-book?"

He nodded.

"I remember that you showed it to me one day when you came to see me at Abercrombie Mansions. We talked about Anne du Clos's character, and how it expressed itself in her handwriting; and then about my character, and how that came out in my handwriting."

He laughed. "Oh yes. There was nothing you liked better than dissecting your neighbours' characters—unless it were dissecting your own."

Lucilla shuddered. Perhaps it was because she was overwrought, but it seemed to her now that there had been something terribly cold-blooded about that conversation.

"I was so full of theories about life that I let what was most vital escape me. I think I was pitiless then, Wallace, though that was the last fault I thought I had," she said, and in spite of his cleverness he did not quite follow her there.

"Mademoiselle du Clos wrote in a small, clear hand, didn't she?" she asked presently.

"Well, she wrote in the pointed, foreign style, with precision and firmness. Her words don't meander all over the sheet as your's do.

He opened his pocket-book to show her. He was glad Lucilla had got off that high horse. He reflected that she was usually amenable if one took hold of her the right way.

Lucilla held out her hand.

"It is getting so dark, I can't see at that distance. Let me look closer at it."

She hoped he did not notice that her hand shook. She wished she were not a coward. She was glad it was dark except for the leaping flames. She was about to do the bravest thing she had ever done in her life, and it was neither defiance nor anger that drove her to it, but sheer, downright love, which is stronger, thank God, than either. The doctor might have done many questionable and bad deeds in the course of his life, but he should not start a new enterprise on an evil foundation if she could prevent it.

"Yes, it is a very pointed writing! It looks as if it were written with a pin. Was there another letter, Wallace?"

"No. One's enough," he said. "It's really worth an introduction or two, Lucy."

With a quick, sudden movement Lucilla thrust the flimsy, worn sheet into the heart of the fire.

"Oh, I know you'll be angry. I can't help it!" she said.

He caught her arm, but he was too late. The flame flared up in a moment. He had gripped her so hard that he hurt her, but the next moment he let her go, and stood back.

"All right. So you *have* upset the boat! Well, swim if you can, Lucy," he said. And that was pretty nearly all he did say.

Lucilla had hardly known what she expected from him, but certainly a great deal more, for the doctor was by no means a taciturn person as a rule, nor one who shrank from speaking his mind roundly. He looked at her with an odd, angry light in his eyes, and shrugged his shoulders, and made no reply to her advances. He *was* angry this time, and she had never seen him really angry before. She tried to explain, to appeal, to make him understand that she had done what she had done for, not against, his interest. His silence appalled her. At last he cut her explanations short.

"That's about enough," he said. "I don't want to hear any more. There's no use in chattering, and your accounts of your own sensations are not interesting. You got the better of me then, because I was fool enough to trust you. I don't care *why* you did it. It's done."

And at that moment Lucilla wished from her heart that she had *not* done it!

Madame Colomb would reap the benefit of her deed—a woman whom she did not even like—and she had estranged her husband because she loved him. The irony of the situation stung her, she felt no supporting glow of virtue, she was not even sure that she had been right. Is it, in fact, ever right to cheat a person, even momentarily and for his own ultimate good? Had she not much better have let the doctor go his own way, even though that way was quite unworthy of him, and though it shocked and horrified her beyond words? What should she do if he never forgave her? Poor Lucilla, she was indeed "an unhappy woman," as Anne had said. What else could be expected when she had given her heart to a man in whose probity she could not trust? She recognised now that that was what she had done, and here was due payment exacted for the folly; but she did not repent the gift—no, in spite of all, she did no repent the gift!

Madame Colomb was sitting at breakfast the next day when a letter was brought her, which Monsieur Colomb eyed inquisitively. He read all Anne's letters, as a rule. She had given in to the bad custom because she rarely disputed over trifles, and seldom received anything of a private or confidential nature. After one glance at the post-mark she put the letter down, and would fain have kept it to read at a more convenient moment.

"But open your letter! Open your letter! It may always be important! I hate to see people careless over their letters," cried Monsieur Colomb irritably, and she read perforce.

"DEAR MADAM,—I write to inform you that the letter written by you to Dr. MacIlvert, dated May 19, 1882, is utterly destroyed. It was burnt to ashes in my presence. I hope that you will now see that you entirely misunderstood Dr.

MacIlvert's words, and that he had not the slightest intention of coercing you.

"I am, Madam,
"Yours faithfully,
"LUCILLA MACILVERT."

"But I did not misunderstand," said Anne. Then she put that missive also into the fire.

"What did you do that for?" grumbled the old man. "You are too fond of secrets, Anne. You do not even make a decent pretence of consulting me about anything. I am a nobody! The one who pays the bills, that's all!"

"It was a letter from the lady I called on yesterday," said Anne. "Poor silly creature! I am sure that her husband is a bit of a rogue, but she will swear to his honour till the breath's out of her body."

"Then he's a lucky rogue," said Monsieur Colomb. "Ah, yes! luckier than some of us who are honest."

Anne stood up, still and straight by the mantelpiece. The fragrance of steaming coffee filled the room, but she could not eat. Lucilla's proud little letter touched her, even though she knew so well she had not misunderstood.

"You are very honest, *mon ami*," she said, "and you have not been lucky. That is what you are thinking, perhaps? You said last night that we have not been very happy, and we have lost our children, who would have kept you from considering whether we were happy or not. I intended to be a model wife to you, Félix; but I have not succeeded. I am sorry for that, but yet I did my best."

She spoke with a certain dignity, which was the more dignified because she was not a woman who enjoyed scenes, or who often spoke of that which lies beneath the surface of life. Her rich, deep voice quivered, and Monsieur Colomb looked at her startled, moved, yet with suspicion—that ever wakeful suspicion.

"Ah! You say you are sorry. What have you to be sorry for, Anne?"

"That I have not succeeded," she repeated, but then took

a resolution that seemed to herself sudden, but which was, in reality, no more sudden than is the opening of a seed pod, when at last, after the influence of sun and rain, after spring and summer, the seeds are ripe.

"And that it was my own fault that I could not succeed. Félix, I should have done better to have told you the truth before I married you—then perhaps we should not have married, but I should have done better! Do you remember what age I was when we became engaged? I was just twenty-four, and you were already grey. Did you never think, never once, 'She must have had some strange experience—must have been seared with a hot iron before she would take me?' for after all I was still handsome, and there were younger men who fancied that they loved me."

"But you accepted me," said Monsieur Colomb, "because I offered to you that respect which you preferred to the sentiment which some of your admirers were pleased to call admiration."

He was quoting her very words, and Anne nodded thoughtfully.

"Did I say that? It is so long ago I have almost forgotten. Yet, Félix, girls do not marry old men except for one of three reasons. It may be that they are so inexperienced that they do not know what love means (it was so with little Jeronime, I think), or they are poor and avaricious, or they have been once madly in love and have been left parched and hard. I had been in the last case. I cannot talk about it even now. *Then* it was like a burn that one does not bear touched, but yet I should have told you."

"I guessed that long ago. Who was he?"

"He was Jeronime's father."

"And that I *knew*," said he.

He dropped his head on his hands and Anne waited. She wondered whether she had been wise to tell him, or, waiving wisdom for once, whether she had even been right. Presently he looked up, and spoke rather hoarsely.

"If you had trusted me—I think—yes, I think I should have let you keep your child, Anne, and perhaps then ours

would have lived. God was angry! I knew that He was angered with you. There was no blessing on our children, because you had deserted yours."

"Jeronime was better fed, better clothed, and better taught than she would have been with me," said Anne, "and I supposed that she was well loved."

"You supposed?" said Monsieur Colomb. "You were content to suppose—and it was your own child."

"Ah—but I was not content!" cried Anne. For a minute her self-control slid from her. "*Mon Dieu*, it was not so easy! It is not easy to be always always hungry for what one has not. To eat husks, and when one has found out that they are not bread, to make no wry faces! I was wrong, but when at last I knew that I had been wrong I said, 'At least I will have the courage of my mistake, I will not wrong Felix too! I will keep the bargain. He shall not have a wife who mopes by his side and visits her sins on him.' It sounds like an excuse, but I speak the truth. I failed, but I tried to keep the bargain."

Monsieur Colomb looked at her from under his bushy eyebrows.

"I believe you did," he said slowly. "Since we married have you been always true to me, Anne?"

"You know that I have. You know that you do not need to ask," said she.

"Oh, you have been chaste as ice!" said the old man. "But you have not made me happy. We have not been very happy."

Anne bit her lip. The words hurt her a good deal.

"But I think that perhaps there is no such state as happiness," she said gently; "*I* never found it! I met ecstasy once, but that is different."

Monsieur Colomb got up and hobbled to the window. Anne, after a moment's pause, sat down by the fire and took up her needlework. That grand explanation was over, and how quietly! She felt tired and discouraged. She owned to herself that though she had been dowered with wits and courage and beauty, she had certainly found the game of life

too difficult for her; she had not even managed to make her old husband happy! That defeat galled her. Yet, in face of his many suspicions and increasing irritability she hoped that it might prove better for him to know than to suspect, and Jeronime would be glad. Yes, that obstinate daughter who saw only the right and wrong, the black and white, would be glad. Monsieur Colomb stood so long at the window that at last she called him.

"Félix, you will make that rheumatism worse if you remain in the draught by the window. Do come to the fire."

Monsieur Colomb turned round then, and spoke stumblingly.

"All these years, all these years, Anne, you have sat by my fire! All these years there has been a woman eating my bread and calling herself my wife who has kept a great secret from me. Her children (who were mine too) died, but she nursed a secret, and *that* pushed them off her lap."

He went haltingly by her, but Anne held out her hand.

"Don't go away to sit by yourself, Félix. What you fancy is not true."

"I think that I have always been by myself," said he.

That disclosure, which was after all so little of a disclosure, took place at the fag end of the Colombs' visit to England. The following day they returned to Paris, to the beautifully ordered, lonely house, which no child ever disarranged.

Anne felt like one who is the thirstier for having sipped. She had had a craving for her daughter, and having yielded to it longed to see her again.

Monsieur Colomb was more instead of less fractious. He repulsed her efforts to cheer him, but was equally angry at being left alone. In March he had another attack of gout, and became so exceedingly depressed that Anne was at her wits' end for any possible source of enlivenment. She had often bitterly and impatiently resented his belief that the death of their children had been a result of Divine wrath, but now her resentment weakened, for one speech of his had touched her. "If you had trusted in me, Anne, I would have let you keep your child." She had never really trusted

any one since her first trust had been betrayed. There lay another mistake. But it is very bad for one to stare too long at mistakes (they hypnotise so that at last one can see nothing else), and Monsieur Colomb, however much he might grumble at her, really depended on his wife's brisk spirits. It horrified her, and she reproached herself sharply when they gave way. One evening he asked suddenly, "Why do you always look tired? Why are you so dull? Why is the whole house so insufferably gloomy?" And poor Anne, to her own intense self-contempt, had to swallow a lump in her throat before she could reply.

"It is because you have the gout, Félix. You must not expect me to allow that it is because I am growing old and stupid!"

"You are getting old," said Félix. "You are not so lively as you once were."

Anne made no reply, the remark came rather painfully home to her.

"I should like to see some one young in the house. I believe that some one young would be good for us."

"Very well, *mon ami*," said Anne. "If you wish it I will invite one of your cousin's children to stay with us."

But her heart sank. She was not fond of her husband's young cousins. She felt bored by the very thought of them. She shrank from the idea of having to chaperone one of them.

"I think that Louise is the least *ennuyante* of the two," she said with a suppressed sigh; "shall it be Louise?"

Immediately she had spoken she wished that she had suggested Marie, for Monsieur Colomb, with the contrariness of gout, would be sure to prefer the girl who had not been proposed.

"No, no, certainly not Louise," said he.

Anne bit her lips and made no further suggestion.

"In fact I have already sent an invitation and received an answer. They come the day after to-morrow."

"*They!*" cried Anne, who, even though she rode her temper with a strong curb, could never be a Griselda.

"*They!* but that is too much, Félix. You should at least consult me before you invite two girls."

"I thought otherwise," said Monsieur Colomb, glowering at her under his bushy eyebrows. "Am I never to be master in my own house?"

"But certainly," said Anne with brisk impatience. "Only since I am mistress, it would have been more convenient to have given me longer notice. So they are both coming? I wonder why your cousin has not written to me herself. She is usually full of injunctions."

"Why should she write to you? Are there no young people in the world but Marie and Louise Colomb?"

"Whom have you invited? Who is coming?" said Anne.

Her voice thrilled with a sudden mad hope. She moved behind his chair, where he could not see her face.

"How you fidget me! That lamp is not flaring, there is no need to turn the wick up and down," said Monsieur Colomb. "Who is coming? I meant it to be a surprise, but I am not so good at keeping secrets. I wrote to the widow of my old friend, Thomas Knight. She comes on Friday with her child and the nurse. Thomas was a fool to be romantic at his age, but he will never know how foolish he was, because he was wise enough to die in time."

Anne, standing behind his chair, could find no words at first. She had suppressed the expression of her deepest feelings for so many years, that it was impossible to clothe them suitably and bring them out now. Her throat ached with unspoken words. She put her hand to it, and laughed, her little hard, artificial laugh.

"We were too old to be sentimental, but—I thank you," she said.

That did not in the least degree express what she was feeling; she hated herself for its inefficiency.

"You are good, Félix," she said, and stooping kissed the back of his bald head.

Old Monsieur Colomb grunted, and rubbed his head with his silk handkerchief. He did not know that Anne had kissed him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE spring winds were blowing through the streets when Jeronime brought her baby to London. Thomasina was quite outgrowing her delicacy and Jeronime lived in and for her. The baby had no rival, for there was no dear Mr. Knight now to claim a share of her time and care. She laughed to think that she had fancied she had got to the last chapter of life, in the sad time before the wonder was born. Why, now she knew that Mrs. de Grouchy had been right—before that happened she had not realised what life meant.

But Emma wondered still what was in store for Jeronime. Would some lucky man some day find the key to a sanctuary that the older woman suspected was still inviolate? or was she incapable of any passion save that of motherhood? Well, all that lay in the lap of the future! Jeronime herself made no guesses; she was absolutely contented with the present.

She and baby had come to stay with Mrs. de Grouchy in town. For the first time since Mr. Knight had brought her home she slept out of her beloved Yellow House. She woke in new surroundings, and found herself an unimportant atom in the great capital instead of mistress of all she surveyed. Emma had occasionally thought it odd that Jeronime was not more overcome by her responsibilities, but she took them very simply.

"I must do the very best I can, but when I make mistakes I shall know Mr. Knight would have understood and would not have let me be too unhappy about them. Mr. Knight always understood," she said.

The remembrance of him was peace and confidence to her, and nothing would have pleased him more than that fact.

Now that the first edge of her grief was blunted, she quoted his opinions and spoke of him very often.

"You see, he believed in me," she said once. "If you know that some one has trusted you and believed in you very much, it makes a difference to the whole of the rest of your life, even when he is gone. That is one of the things I must be to my baby. I must be some one who always believes in her, whether she is good or naughty or stupid or clever. But I shall try to become wiser in all directions, for fear I should be a dull mother for her." The next minute she added quaintly, "It is a very high calling to be Thomasina's mother. You see, I cannot help knowing that she is so wonderful."

Emma smiled, but did not contradict the saying. For, indeed, it is fortunate that that very high calling is given by Him who is no respector of persons, and that not one, but many thousands of "Marys" all over the world marvel and ponder over the miracle that their loving eyes behold when the spirit of God takes shape and dwells again within their arms.

The decided lines of Jeronime's character, however, showed no signs of melting in this new fire of love. Mrs. MacIlvert had refused to be godmother to Thomasina, but Jeronime was determined to go to see her, and had come to London for that very purpose. The short and unsatisfactory letter she had received made her more set on her purpose.

"Indeed, dear Joy, I have quite lost the spirit to undertake fresh responsibilities, and since you never appreciate my dear husband, I do not feel that it is possible for you and me to draw together again," Lucilla had written.

"I shouldn't say I don't appreciate, I should say I detest and despise the doctor," remarked Jeronime. "Poor, poor godmother! This makes me more sure he beats her. It is so unlike her to be afraid of fresh responsibilities—why, she was always undertaking them!"

She pondered over that note as she crossed Vauxhall Bridge, and paused for a moment to watch with delight the gulls swooping on the river. Before she was a mother Jeronime had loved life unconsciously, as all young things should; since

she had been down into that abyss she loved it consciously, and her beautiful violet eyes had deepened in expression. They were the eyes of a woman, not of a child now, though to the end of her days she retained a certain child-like simplicity and directness of vision. She had traced Mrs. MacIlvert's whereabouts through Quentin Mavis, but when she stood on the doorstep of the lodgings she had to gather all her courage together to overcome an access of shyness. She had always been shy with her quondam guardian. Lucilla's emotional nature had had a most unfortunate effect on Jeronime, who scolded herself heartily.

"You must go in, Jeronime! What are you here for? You don't deserve to have a baby if you let your silly selfishness get the better of you. Mothers have no business to be selfish."

Then she rang the bell, and presently followed a rather untidy maid into a depressing sitting-room.

An untouched meal was on the table. Dead spectres of flowers were on the mantelpiece. The fire was unlit, and the room cold.

"Mrs. MacIlvert is still in her bedroom," the maid said in a somewhat aggrieved tone. "There's no knowing what time she'll have any meal. What name shall I say?"

Jeronime scribbled on a card, "Dear godmother, do please see me!" and sat down by the comfortless grate to wait.

"The doctor knows she has never been accustomed to waiting on herself; he might at least see that she has a fire!" Jeronime reflected indignantly.

The change of fortunes had not been his fault, but she had hardly finished blaming him for it when the door opened and Lucilla came in. Jeronime had not seen her since the day when they had met in Paris, and she was silent with dismayed surprise. Lucilla was attired in a shabby black tea-gown, and she had done her hair abominably. She had been a person who dressed exquisitely and in a characteristic style of her own, but she had always had a maid to arrange her still beautiful hair, and a man-milliner to carry out all her ideas. She had become so thin since her illness that her gown seemed to

hang on her bones, and black never suited her. She looked languidly at Jeronime. She was not excited, not even mildly interested.

"Why, it is you, Joy!" she said. "Dear me! It is a great many ages since we last saw each other. How well you look! I think you have grown taller too!"

Her voice sounded weak, and she paused to cough and to lean for a second on the table, as she made her way across the room.

"Dear godmother, *you* don't look well," said Jeronime. "Why did you not let me come before? I had no idea that you had been so ill."

"Oh, I am well now," said Lucilla. "But I was very ill last year. I should have died if it had not been for my husband. He is the best nurse in the world."

Jeronime did not think she did much credit to his nursing.

"Is he away just now?" she asked.

"Yes, yes; he is away for the day. He has a great deal to do. He manages all my affairs. If I had followed his advice we should still be rich. He is an excellent man of business."

"I am so dreadfully sorry that you have lost money," said Jeronime shyly. "It does seem a shame! You were always so generous, godmother, that it seems doubly a shame that you should have been defrauded. I cannot say how sorry I am."

Lucilla shivered. "It is a pity, and very cold and uncomfortable," she said blankly. "But then, I am very glad that it was not in any way *his* doing. On the contrary, if I had followed—oh, I believe I said that before."

She put her hand to her head, and Jeronime looked anxiously at her.

"Your lunch is quite stone cold. They might have put a cover on the dish. I don't think they take much care of you here. Could you not come back with me, godmother?"

"I never could be punctual, you know," said Lucilla, with the faintest ghost of a smile. "Consequently I eat my meals cold—or go without. It doesn't really matter, for I am not at all hungry."

"Do come back with me!" said Jeronime eagerly. "We'll have lunch at a restaurant on the way back, and then you shall see my baby. She is such a darling!" She hesitated a moment, and then added shyly, "I was very unhappy, but she has comforted me, godmother. There is no comforter like a baby. I should like to put her in your arms."

Lucilla shook her head.

"No, thank you, Joy. She would not comfort me in the least; but I am glad for your sake that you have her."

She sat down wearily, and sank into a reverie. The silence became oppressive. Jeronime made another valiant effort.

"Godmother, if it is a money bother that is troubling you, do please—please remember what a lot you spent on *me!* Sums and sums on my clothes and my education and dentists and doctors and every kind of luxury. If I were allowed to pay something back now, it would only be fair, and——"

"I am not quite a beggar, dear one!" said Lucilla, "and what I gave I gave. I may have made many mistakes, but I have not fallen so low as to consent to be paid for what was a free gift."

"I beg your pardon. I always did say the wrong thing to you," said Jeronime, blushing ruefully. "Isn't there anything that I can do?" she lingered obstinately. "There must be something if I could only hit on it. Anybody but me would find it, I suspect. I wish I were cleverer."

"I do not need anything," said Lucilla. "It is true we lost some money, but my dear husband manages so cleverly that in point of fact I scarcely observe the difference in our fortunes."

That, Jeronime knew, was untrue. Indeed, it did not tally with Lucilla's previous remark about cold and discomfort; but absolute accuracy had never been one of her virtues.

Jeronime sighed. Her more simple soul was much perplexed by the situation.

"You might let me help you, godmother. Why shouldn't I?"

"Because you never loved me, Joy," said Lucilla with a flash of spirit.

"But is one never to be allowed to learn?" said Jeronime humbly. "Godmother, I am learning from baby every day."

Lucilla, who was always easily melted, kissed her.

"Dear little Joy! I am so thankful to see you so happy," she murmured. "I am sure your dear baby is crying for you now. I seem to hear her."

She pushed the young mother gently to the door. "Goodbye, Joy! It was so good of you to have come, and I am so pleased to have seen you, but I shall not expect you here again, for our plans are very uncertain, and we may be leaving any day. Goodbye, dear Joy."

Jeronime departed perforce, and very sadly. A woman with elaborately tortured hair and dressed in shabby finery accosted her at the foot of the stairs.

"May I have a word with you, madam? May I ask if you are a relative of Mrs. MacIlvert's?"

Jeronime was about to say "No," but changed her mind and answered in the affirmative, reflecting that she had been related by adoption, though not by blood, and being inclined at the moment to make the most of her obligation.

"Then in that case I may speak to you," said the woman, and led the way into the ground-floor parlour, which smelt of cabbages and stuffiness.

"I am Mrs. Smythe," she explained. "I have kept these apartments ever since I was reduced in circumstances and obliged to leave the mansion we had in the neighbourhood of Grosvenor Square, and to give up my carriage and horses. I always endeavour to satisfy every reasonable requirement on the part of the lodgers, but this establishment is not a hospital nor a nursing home, and if Mrs. MacIlvert should become more seriously ill I could not undertake the responsibility."

Jeronime looked at the sharp-featured face, with the pale eyes that were as hard as gimlets. It appeared to her that no sick person could possibly wish Mrs. Smythe to undertake the responsibility.

"Of course you could not," she said.

"It is customary for the lodgers to take at least two meals in the house, and I have been used to manage for ladies and

gentlemen in the highest society—late dinners, *recherché* suppers, and so on."

"Yes?"

"But Mrs. MacIlvert will go the whole day with cups of tea at irregular hours, and then perhaps a little clear soup ordered at eight o'clock. Clear soup is a most difficult thing to make, but I keep a first-rate cusine, and my cook is entirely competent, though as often as not Mrs. MacIlvert will leave her plate untouched."

"But why do you tell *me* this?" said Jeronime bluntly.

"Oh, if Mrs. MacIlvert's relatives are entirely satisfied I may presume it is all right; I wish to be reassured, madam, that is all."

"Dr. MacIlvert will be in in a few hours, I suppose. If you are uneasy about Mrs. MacIlvert had you not better speak to him?"

"Oh, if the doctor is coming back," said Mrs. Smythe, her brow clearing. "In that case I am sorry I ventured to trouble you, madam. I was not aware he was expected to-day. He left Mrs. MacIlvert here in October, that's five months ago, and I am sure we shall be pleased to see him again. Such a nice, cheerful gentleman, though very particular. He will have everything 'just so,' will Dr. MacIlvert."

"In October!" echoed Jeronime, then checked any further comment.

"I see you are surprised. Perhaps you did not know he had been in France so long? You are certain he is returning to-day, madam?"

"I—I don't really know anything about it," said Jeronime. "I do not think you should talk about your lodgers. If you have no more reason for speaking to me I will go now."

"Talk! I am the last person in the world to talk," said Mrs. Smythe. "But I have to keep up the high tone of my establishment. Since you are connected with Mrs. MacIlvert it is my duty to tell you that I consider that she is in a very poor way of health, and in a very melancholy condition of mind. I have never had any unpleasantness in my rooms, deaths or otherwise. If Mrs. MacIlvert were to die on my

hands I should be placed in an exceedingly awkward position."

"She shan't die on your hands," said Jeronime. "Here is my address. You must send for me if she is worse, but anyhow I will come again."

She slid something besides the address into Mrs. Smythe's hand, but she felt terribly guilty as she did so.

"Godmother would be so furiously angry if she knew, but what *is* to be done?" she kept saying to herself, as she walked home to her baby.

The next day she went again, but was not admitted; then she waited a week and tried once more. Lucilla was still invisible. Mrs. Smythe threw out dark hints about the "poor lady upstairs," but the acidity of her manner was softened by Jeronime's tips, and by the knowledge that the "poor lady" had rich friends in the background.

At last in despair Jeronime consulted Mrs. de Grouchy, whom of all women she trusted most.

"What shall I do? I can't think what to do! I go over and over again to those dismal lodgings, but she won't let me in. Yet how can I possibly leave her to break her heart, and perhaps die all alone there? I think Dr. MacIlvert has deserted her. Well, I should suppose poor godmother might be glad of that, for she must surely have found out how horrid he is, but she doesn't look glad. She is ill, and miserable, and changed. I just forced my way up last week. Godmother didn't want me at all. I gave Mrs. Smythe some more money to buy turtle soup with, and told her never to say it came from me. Godmother won't think twice about it, for she never notices what she is eating. But after all, what use is there in turtle soup? She wants to die, I believe, and how can I prevent it? I am no earthly good to her now! I never was the right kind of person for godmother, and yet I can't, I can't just leave her alone! What can I do?"

She repeated the question over and over again. She had been deserted herself, therefore to desert any one in misfortune seemed to her the one impossible sin. Mrs. de Grouchy, fond as she was of Jeronime, became tired of the hopeless *cul-de-sac*, and at last spoke her mind.

"You are right, you are not the person to help her. It is not you, it is her husband that the poor lady wants."

"But she pretends to me that he is only away for the day, or just out for a few hours, and I can't break into her confidence. It's bad enough to have forced myself into her room. Poor godmother! When I was a child she always complained that I never confided in her, and now I haven't the key to her confidence. Well, it just serves me right; but what is to be done? Why, she doesn't even care to see baby! If she could see baby I'm sure she'd feel better, but she won't even admit *her!*"

"I should write to Dr. MacIlvert," said Emma sensibly, after a minute's consideration. "He may be as bad a man as you say he is, but the worst of men are human. It is possible that he does not know how ill she is."

"I hate him!" said Jeronime. "I can't write to Dr. MacIlvert because I won't have anything to do with him; besides, I don't know his address. What are you thinking about?"

"I am thinking," said Emma, "that in all probability you will have to do with the person you hate, if not in this world then in the next. Hate, like love, is something between you. It shows that your character has an effect on the other, or the other on yours."

"Oh." Jeronime considered awhile, then, "If I were but a man my character would have an effect on that doctor," she said. "It would have a good strong effect with a horsewhip, I think, and I only wish it might."

But that night, after Emma supposed her guest to be asleep, Jeronime tapped at her door and came in.

"I know you stay up half the night," she said apologetically, "and I want to tell you that I have made up my mind what to do. I am going to Paris, and I am going to see Dr. MacIlvert, for I suppose that you are right and that godmother pines for that dreadful man. I do not understand it at all, but I never have quite understood godmother."

She seemed so young and childlike still as she stood in the doorway in her straight white nightgown and blue dressing-

gown, that Emma, meeting her candid glance, kissed her.

"I am sure I hope I was right, my dear. Come in and tuck your feet up on my bed and let me cover them up."

Jeronime jumped upon the unslept-in bed and looked round her.

"Your room feels to me like a church," she said. "It's a a very lucky thing that there are so many different sorts of people in the world, isn't it? If you ever should have one tiny little prayer to spare, away from—my father, will you spend it on me? I may want it badly some time, being so stupid. I have had a letter from Monsieur Colomb to-day. I like Monsieur Colomb. He asks baby and me to stay with him in Paris. He says that he should like to see baby because she is the child of his dearest friend, but at the very end of his letter he writes, 'It will also be a comfort to your mother to see you and your child,' so Maman has told him, and I am glad of that! That makes one lie less in the world, and all the wickedness in it comes from lies, I think. I know that you knew whose child I was, and that is why you were good to me when you first met me. But *now*," she added, with a gentle pride, "now I am Mr. Knight's widow and my baby's mother."

"It is curious that you should have divined that I knew," said Emma. "But though you do not resemble your father in many traits, you inherit from him a gift of divination."

"I don't wish to resemble him," said Jeronime, and a slow wave of colour crept over her face. "I belong to my mother. My father was nothing to me, nor I to him."

"He thought of you—at the end," said Emma gravely.

"It was rather late," said Jeronime. But then she repented of her words.

"I should not have said that to you," she whispered. "Please forgive me; you love him, as much as I love baby. Besides, fathers can never be like mothers. Fathers love their children moderately, and if they behave well and are no bother to them, but mothers have no 'ifs.' Of course Thomasina's

father was an exception—*he* would have loved her as well as I do."

"My dear," said Emma, "you do not know much about men and women yet. Don't generalise too soon, and think as kindly of your father as you can—for you may be sure that sooner or later all debts have to be paid."

Jeronime nodded. "Well, I will. Some one else told me once that it was 'safest to be kind,' and after all life is wonderfully beautiful and interesting, and if it had not been for him I should not be alive. I am always very glad I was born, you know!"

Mrs. de Grouchy smiled wonderingly. She did not find the joys outbalance the sorrows in the ledger of life, but here again she recognised a trace of Jeronime's father. Despite his sins De Grouchy had known the zest of living, and he too had found life wonderfully interesting.

"I am going to retire from the bustle, Jeronime," said she. "After Whitsuntide I shall have left all this behind me. I am going to live for the future in the convent, and according to rule of the sisters of the Sacré Cœur."

Jeronime looked at her wistfully. "I am very sorry for that. I do not see why good people should desert us and shut themselves away from us. I think the world is certainly puzzling sometimes, and that we need you in it."

"It is not desertion," said Emma. "The world is busy and has little enough time for prayer, and not every one has the gift of meditation or the longing to realise the unseen. Those who pray constantly bring to you who strive and fight and buy and sell, and are husbands and fathers and wives and mothers, that spiritual light which will make it less puzzling. They help to keep the balance straight, but their vocation is not for every one. A world of monks and nuns would be impossible, yet they are no more deserters than the scout who goes in front of the army is a deserter because he does not march in line with the others. Behind the passing show is the reality. It is always there, everlasting and unchangeable. Is it not well that some few of us should stand a little apart to bear witness to it? There are plenty to look at the painted curtain, just a

few surely may try to pierce through to the light which burns behind, and fixing their eyes on that pay no more heed to the dreams which are of now and of time."

Jeronime, who was mystical herself *au fond*, had some sympathy for this view; indeed she had always some sympathy for Emma de Grouchy.

"Perhaps that is true," she said, "though I think Mr. Knight would have said it was Papistical; it may be true, but," she added with a flash of insight, "*you* are doing it only for my father's sake. Oh, I know!"

Emma de Grouchy shrank a little as from too intimate contact.

"We will not talk any more about me," she said. "You were telling me how Monsieur Colomb had written to you. It is good of the old man.

"He *is* good," said Jeronime; "I think that he is one of the best people I know."

She spoke warmly, for that Monsieur Colomb was testy and irritable, stingy in small matters and fidgety over trifles, never at all affected her opinion. She was apt to take people as they were fundamentally and to pay no heed to their surface qualities. It was an odd and sometimes inconvenient trait.

"Is it not strange? I have been constantly wondering what to do about godmother, and now Maman's letter to me has a great deal about the doctor in it. Maman says that he is making an immense sensation in Paris. There is a great deal of talk about him. He is trying colour cures on his patients. He has quite cured a lady who was a martyr to nervous headaches. He put her into a room that was all violet, with violet-coloured windows. It sounds so dreadfully silly, doesn't it? But Maman says that the funny part of it is that he *does* cure people. I shall have no difficulty in finding him."

"But so far as I remember, I advised you to write to him, not to go to see him," said Emma anxiously.

"Yes, I know," said Jeronime. "But if one does a thing at all one had better do it thoroughly. You see, he can tear up a letter, or say he never had it, but if I go to tell him how ill godmother is, why, then he *must* attend to me. I shall just

stand in front of him and say quite plainly, 'Godmother is so ill and unhappy that she will die if you leave her alone much longer.' I don't wish to do it, because I should have thought she would be so much better without him. But then there is no use in trying to help people in one's own way instead of their way. One only makes them more miserable than they were before. So soon as one has money, one begins to learn how very careful one must be not to make people more miserable than they were before one interfered. Yet I *don't* like it!"

Emma smiled at her with a very motherly expression. Jeronime was always pathetic in her eyes.

"I do not feel sure that you are wise. I think it might be wiser to write, but it is good of you to make the effort," she said.

"Oh, well," said Jeronime, blushing, as she slid off the bed. "I am *not* good, you know, but Mr. Knight always believed that I was, and that makes a difference. Besides, since I am baby's mother, I must try not to shirk things. I am going to bed now. Good-night."

When she got to the door she turned back, put both her arms round Emma, and hugged her.

"I do wish you would stay in the world," she cried. "*I* want you, but I don't believe God needs so much reminding about His duties. If He loves us as much as mothers love their babies, He must always really have His arms under every one and everything."

"My dear, of course He has! It is not that we doubt that," said Emma.

The "we" chilled Jeronime; it seemed to place her friend already in another community. But Jeronime's warm embrace brought the rare colour to Emma's cheek, and she returned it without a remembrance of debts to be paid. Jeronime had crept right into that deep, narrow heart, and found a place there. When Emma entered the convent she carried some love for her husband's child with her; when she died, which was not till she was an old woman, I hope that she carried it with her still, behind that curtain of which some souls are so impatient, and to the living and eternal Fount from which all love comes.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE events we expect often happen (that is if we have a fair share of discernment and observation), but they never happen exactly after the fashion in which we expected them. Jeronime had always at the bottom of her heart expected that "Maman" would one day tell the truth about her, but she had dreaded the moment of revelation, even while she heartily desired it. Lately, since she had quite left childhood behind her, and learnt many strange things, she had both dreaded and prayed for it more. It had been with an unspoken shrinking that she had accepted Monsieur Colomb's invitation, but the meeting was not in the least terrible. Madame Colomb scolded her for not having brought a warmer wrap for the crossing; Monsieur Colomb was slightly put out, because the boat train was a few minutes late. He was as kind and as tiresome as usual. She had been many days under his roof before he so much as referred to that past secret, but Anne, when they stood together in Jeronime's bedroom, said—

"Your obstinacy is rewarded! You may call me Maman now!"

"Monsieur Colomb is very good, Maman," said Jeronime.

She looked round her rather sadly. It was strange to be back again in this pretty room. Here she had slept just before her marriage; from this house she had written to her dearest old friend, and begged him to marry her quickly. Ah, what a baby she had been! She felt a hundred years older now.

"He is better than I guessed," assented Anne. "One sees people as one is oneself, I suppose. I did not trust Félix enough. I might have saved him and myself a good many

years of unhappiness. What a waste! and I who hate waste."

"I am glad that you have told him," said Jeronime; "and now you need never be afraid of that doctor."

Anne laughed. "No; but I never was much afraid of him. *Mon enfant*, I warn you, you will be shocked! I have praised him to the skies to all my acquaintance. I have sent already dozens of sufferers to him. Yes, I see that you are quite horrified, but there it is. My letter is destroyed, and after I heard that, I could not be some an as to do nothing for him. After all, I am convinced that he is a very clever doctor, and since one poor fool has married him the rest are safer."

"Maman!" cried Jeronime aghast.

"Ah, well—I sent no babies," said Anne apologetically.

. . . . . .

Dr. MacIlvert received patients in his own rooms between the hours of ten and twelve, one and four, and five and seven. Jeronime set off on the expedition for which she had great misliking, and easily found her way to his house. She went early in the morning, for she was anxious to get the business over. When she saw the liveried footman who opened the door, she thought of Lucilla in lodgings off the Vauxhall Road, with a fresh access of indignation. She sent in her card, and waited her turn in a good-sized room, which was already quite full of ladies.

The room was panelled in oak, and had pretty Gothic windows. Jeronime was relieved that she was not placed in a red, green, or blue light while waiting. She had an almost childish horror of his experiments. All the ladies talked about the doctor to each other in undertones. She longed to shout out loud, "Do not have anything to do with him!" The whispers got on her nerves. At intervals the door was opened, and a smart person in green cloth and silver buttons signalled to one or other. Every now and again Jeronime caught the distant sound of the doctor's Scotch accents and mellow voice. He gave a great deal of time to each individual: they all agreed that he was immensely careful and particular.

They told anecdotes about him, and one lady mimicked his funny Scotch-French, but he was evidently popular.

It was just five minutes to twelve when the last patient and Jeronime were left alone together. The last patient was quite old, with wavy, snow-white hair and sharp, delicate features. She told Jeronime that she had believed herself to be dying of cancer, but that this wonderful doctor thought that he could cure her.

"He has done me much good already," she said. "He is so hopeful and so very, very kind. I am not a rich woman, and I feared that I could not afford his treatment; but he assured me that he would rather pay me to be cured than leave the chance untried," she smiled wistfully. "Most doctors do not pay their patients to be cured, do they?"

Jeronime, much as she distrusted the doctor, had not the heart to say, "And if he fails?" but she thought, and perhaps looked the question, for the old lady added—

"Ah, you are saying to yourself that perhaps he will kill instead of curing. But then I was under sentence of death already, and he knows that, so that if he does not succeed I shall be no worse off than before, and I shall not blame him. No, no; he will be bitterly disappointed if I do not get well, and I hope not to disappoint him, but I shall never blame him."

And at that moment the doctor came in. He shot one quick glance at Jeronime, and then spoke to the old lady.

"I fancied that you were the last I had to see this morning, so I came here to save you the walk to my consulting-room. Since you are not the last, will you take my arm? Mind, you must never, never tell any one that I break through all the rules of the establishment for you, dear Madame Charpentier."

He spoke very gently to Madame Charpentier. He carried her shabby little black bag and cotton parasol for her, and treated her with great respect. Jeronime, seeing the way she looked up at him, felt suddenly inclined to cry.

Half an hour later Jeronime watched him put the old lady into a *fiacre*, and heard him say—

"No, no, it is part of my cure! You must drive home

comfortably to-day," and she saw him pay the driver. Madame Charpentier's delicate old face had a faint tint of pink, like a faded rose; she was smiling and bright and courageous.

It puzzled Jeronime. Was he, after all, not so bad? He stood on the doorstep for a moment, looking after the *fiacre*. The old lady waved her frail, small hand as she drove off; he smiled in response, but then the smile died away, and his face fell into grave and anxious lines. It would have taken a cleverer person than Jeronime to know how much real kindliness was mixed with his intense desire to effect a cure in this case. Certainly he made no money out of this patient, and she thought him nearly an angel, and never spoke of him without gratitude. He liked her too—he liked her courage and faith, and he knew he was doing a risky thing.

"If I pull this through," he said to himself, but to her he said, "*When* I have pulled this through."

Then he dismissed that case from his mind, and went briskly into the waiting-room.

"I am afraid you've been waiting a long time," said he; "but you should not come in my patients' hours when you have nothing in the world the matter with you. *You* don't want to see me professionally, eh?"

"Oh no," said Jeronime.

The fervour of her tone made him laugh. He really had a strong sense of humour. He was curious to know what she had come to him for, but he wouldn't help her out. He could nearly always set people at ease when he wished to, and he usually did wish to, but he had never quite forgotten the awkward five minutes that Jeronime had once given him. She noticed that his short, thick hair had become quite grey, and that he had aged a good deal.

"I have come to tell you about godmother," she said. "I do not know whether you know that she is very ill?"

He had not known it, but his face never betrayed him.

"Dear me! It's very kind of you to come here to tell me about my wife," he said. "Now Lucy will have been pleased to see you again, eh?"

"No, she was not pleased to see me," said Jeronime. "She did not want to see me at all. She will not stay with me, or let me do anything for her, because I do not like you. I tried to persuade her, but she would not be persuaded."

"Ah! and you tried before. You tried to persuade her not to marry me, and she would not be persuaded! Tut, tut! Lucy must be very unreasonable!" said he.

Jeronime knew that he was laughing at her; but that did not matter one way or the other. She saw one thing at a time, and the one thing to be done now was to insist on his paying attention to her tidings.

"Godmother is ill," she persisted. "She is so ill that if I could have been of any comfort to her I would not have left England. I don't know if you *want* her to die. If you don't, I think you had better go back to her. If you do, of course it is useless for me to tell you about her."

"Just so! In that case you would certainly be wasting your time and *mine*—and mine, which is important, my dear young lady," he said. He drew out his watch. "I don't wish to hurry you, but it is five minutes to one, and I am late this morning. This is the only five minutes I have off before six this evening, and I should be eating my lunch now. I can give you three minutes more, if you have more to say; but may I beg you not to repeat yourself? What makes you believe that my wife is very ill?"

"She doesn't eat—the landlady says she doesn't, and that she walks about her room all night."

"Anything else?"

"She has got so thin you can see all her bones."

"Anything else?"

"She coughs constantly—but go and see for yourself! Oh, *go*—for I believe she wants you, though I can't think why. Perhaps if I hadn't always disliked you so much you would listen now; but I really couldn't help that, you know; and I am sure you had better go."

A twinkle came into his eyes.

"No, no; I'm sure you couldn't help that!" he said cheerfully. "And you couldn't prevent my dear wife from

marrying me, though you did your best, you did your best! But now I'll tell you something. It's not so much strength that tells as knack. It's the way you push, d'you see?"

He opened the door for her as he spoke. His habit of philosophising had grown on him, for some of his patients were impressed by it. When he was alone again he frowned. So Lucy was very ill. Well, it was her own fault—she should not have gone against him. He devoured his lunch at railway speed, though he shook his head at himself for so doing, for he really was not young enough to play tricks with his digestion. Then he flung himself again into his work. One of the secrets of his popularity lay in the ardour with which he did everything. His energy was immense and infectious. He was getting on splendidly. The money that had been realised on the sale of Hollowdene had started him well; and then, after all, Madame Colomb had given him those introductions. That last fact considerably softened his wrath against poor Lucilla. She had played trumps for him without knowing it. She could hardly have done better, as it turned out—no, not if she had been the most astute person in the world, instead of a headstrong, sentimental fool, with a spice of still ineradicable wilfulness in her. He realised that now, but he could not allow Lucilla to have the upper hand. That would never do. The thought of her illness haunted him. Women were kittle cattle, and one had to be careful in dealing with them. What if she were to die? He did not like that idea (though in some ways he might get on better if unhampered by a delicate wife); in fact, when he came to consider it, he could imagine nothing that he should dislike more. He felt annoyed and angry when he contemplated the possibility. If Lucy was about to play him such a scurvy trick as that, he said to himself, he must go back to London in time to prevent it. She would not die if he had hold of her, for she had nearly always been ruled by him, except in that matter about Madame Colomb's letter.

And here again was a strange fact. From the moment when Lucilla had put that letter in the fire he had acquired a kind of surprised respect for her. He had not known it at

the time, because he had been angry, and the vein of brutality in him had made him hit back. He knew very well that she could not get on without him, and that to leave her alone was about as vigorous a retaliation as he could make. He had left her without compunction, but now he was relenting. Dr. MacIlvert did not often relent, for, though some of his patients found him so wonderfully comprehending, he was not a very soft-hearted person.

"I warned her that if she would upset the boat she must swim by herself," he said. But then her opposition had not been for the sake of herself, but for love of him; and he was not stupid; he saw that well enough. It had been ill-judged; it was not to be encouraged; matters were on a wrong footing when Lucy took to playing conscience to him, but—well, here was this "but" again.

He could send for her, of course, but she would never manage the journey alone if she were ill—even when she was well she required an immense deal of looking after. Dr. MacIlvert always had looked after her when they were together. He was one of the men who instinctively take charge of any woman they are thrown with. That was one of the traits in him that had won Lucilla's foolish heart. He sent for a time-table while he was eating his dinner that night.

"Pack up my clothes; I am suddenly called to England," he explained. "I shall return on Saturday, and I shall bring Mrs. MacIlvert back with me."

He went out after dinner and strolled to the Bois de Boulogne. He was tired, for he had been working very hard; and though he had been successful, this effort in Paris had taken it out of him. He sat down on a bench rather wearily. There was a national *fête* going on. The park was illuminated with little swinging lanterns. Groups of people wearing tri-coloured cockades were walking arm-in-arm, but it was early yet, and the crowd was orderly enough.

The doctor never went into the thick of the throng if he could avoid it, because of an experience that was burnt into his memory. He had once fought for his life in a crowd, and he knew what it felt like to face the wild beast in man, un-

armed except for the arms that Nature has provided. It was not an experience to smile at, even afterwards. Dr. MacIlvert was inclined to robust views on the whole; most of the people who were acquainted with him, and all his patients, would have said that one of his strong points was his cheerful optimism, but there had been grim passages in his life. Perhaps it was because he was tired that he kept thinking about those grim passages while he rested on that bench. He had had a rough boyhood; his early manhood had been spoilt, partly by his own fault, but partly by slander. He had nearly been torn in bits by a mob; he had nearly (much more nearly than any one guessed) starved. If it had not been for Lucilla—— But yes! though she had twice cheated him and gone against him, and though he had had every right to be angry, he would be good to Lucy; for, when he looked backwards, which was a bad habit to get into, he knew that no one else had ever been so fond of him, and whether we are saints or sinners, that must count for something.

He had reached this point in his meditations when he noticed that some one was sitting on the seat by his side. The bench had been empty when he came up to it, but now there was a woman on it. The woman was spare and small. She was dressed in an old-fashioned black velvet jacket, buttoned tightly across her narrow chest, and trimmed with a beaded braid that seemed to belong to a past era. The doctor observed this, because he always observed everything. She stooped, like an old person; and her hair, so much of it as showed beneath her black bonnet, was iron-grey and thin. When he first noticed her, her head was turned from him; but presently she moved slightly and looked full at him, and the light from the red and blue lanterns hanging above fell on her small, bloodless face, with its pinched features, and eyes from which the colour seemed faded.

Dr. MacIlvert was not a hypersensitive gentleman. The reader who has so far followed his career with any interest will have recognised that; but when this woman looked at him he shuddered. And she gazed, and gazed, and gazed! Her eyes were small and sunken deep in their sockets. Neither

fear, nor love, nor hope looked out of them, but a coldly inquisitive, malevolent recognition which he could not account for, and which made his flesh creep.

"You seem to know me, madam," said he. "Now I pride myself on never forgetting a face, but I cannot remember you."

She did not laugh, but her thin, pale lips moved as though she *would* have laughed if there had been any spark of mirth left in her. The doctor would very much have liked to have got up and walked off. He did not do so, because, notwithstanding all his vices, he was not given to running away, and the habit of a man's life rules him in a crisis, even despite his own will.

"Yes, I know you," she said, "though you are much stouter than you used to be, and you are growing old."

Her high, treble voice struck disagreeably on his ear; it reminded him of some one, but he could not think of whom. It seemed to him the ghost of some voice which he had heard when he was younger. Like many of his compatriots, Dr. MacIlvert had a lurking horror of ghosts.

"Who are you?" he asked bluntly. He had almost said, "*What* are you?" but his common sense came to the rescue in time.

"I am nothing," she answered; and her lips moved again in that soundless travesty of a laugh, in a malicious mockery that was unsalted by honest merriment. "And some day you will be nothing too. You can't go on for ever. Your hair is white on your temples, and there are a great many grey threads in your beard."

The doctor scrutinised his neighbour more carefully. He began to suspect that she was mad. He had met a great many mad people in the course of his life, and they always interested him. Poor old soul! she was probably one of the forlorn army of poverty-stricken and incapable women, who barely scrape a living when they are young, and who drift into hopeless penury when they are old. Her troubles must have turned her brain! He was inclined to pity her, for though he could be merciless when he was opposed, he was often sorry

for such cases. Every doctor must, alas! meet numbers of them, and he had imagination enough to understand the dreary loneliness of these badly equipped lives. He always humoured a maddish patient, and he fell in with her humour now.

"Why, there's no doubt you're right, my dear madam, and that I certainly can't go on for ever," said he. "I shouldn't at all wonder, now, if *you* were to outlive me. The cracked pitcher goes oftenest to the well."

"No, you outlived me, Wallace!" she returned, and he fairly jumped.

An increasing sense of the uncanny took him by the throat, his ruddy colour changed, and still she looked and looked at him with that passionless inquisition, which was almost more than he could stand.

"You flourished like a green bay-tree," she said. "You stayed outside in the air and the sun, but I was shut up for ever and ever and ever. One day was just like another—all ugly and grey and dun-coloured. There were a great many of them; they went on and on and on, till at last I died. I suffered horribly at first, while the walls were closing round me; they came a little nearer each month, but after I was once quite dead it did not matter. You have not suffered at all yet, but that will come!"—she nodded spitefully—"oh yes, it's sure to come!"

And then he recognised her, and the blood seemed to rush back to his heart, and with it his courage.

"You are Alice! You are Lady Lennox!" he cried, "and you've the impudence, yes, the d——d impudence, to come back to accuse *me* whom you did your level best to ruin!"

It was the oddest speech he had ever made in his life, but his Maker alone knows what very odd and unlooked-for things may come to the surface when the inner self of a man rises up.

"The d——d impudence!" he repeated angrily, "but you were always an impudent woman. *I* flourished like a green bay-tree, while you were shut up, you say? I didn't flourish! and you were justly imprisoned for a most cold-blooded

murder that I rightly denounced you for, and that I had no hand in, nor ever would have abetted in spite of the lie you told the jury—yes, which you told all England! My career was killed by the poison of that lie; it clung like a snake to me, and pulled me down again and again, and you *dare* come out of your grave to accuse me!"

"Oh, but you're bad, you know, Doctor," she said, waving her small hands, that were cased in shabby black woollen gloves, as if she were waving aside his righteous indignation. "You're rotten bad all through! I always knew you were bad even when we kissed each other. No, you didn't help me to poison him, because you cared much too much for your own safety, but there's nothing outside yourself that you care for, nothing! *I* found out that. When the walls close round you, and the grey days begin to slowly kill you, you'll know that it's true. You'll long for something outside yourself then, you'll call out for something, but there won't be any way of escape, there won't be anything. If I'd any gladness left in me (but I'm too dead to be glad), I should be glad of that."

Again the doctor shuddered. Alice had always been a spiteful little cat, he reflected, though as pretty a bit of pink and white as he had ever seen. The pink and white was gone now, but the spitefulness remained! The ghosts of dead vices are appalling. The horror he felt nearly mastered him. It was like the resurrection of a horror that had sickened him years ago, when the method of her crime first dawned on him, and he had seen that she expected him to connive at it. He had been bad, but not bad enough for *that*. "What do you take me for?" he had shouted then, and now. "It's another lie! I'm not like *that!*" he cried.

His voice shook. It seemed as though he were before the Judgment-seat of God, instead of sitting on a bench in the Bois de Boulogne with a decidedly cracked old woman.

"You say I was bad—well, to you I was. A woman sees the side of a man that she calls out. Some of you call out the beast, and some of you the angel. That's brutal, you'll say, but you are not over-polite yourself, you know! I've not

been bad to Lucy; that is, not altogether bad, and I care very much for my profession. When I am near my end, which you look forward too with so much pleasure, and the bad time comes, as it will, of course, I shall hold on to my love of my profession and to Lucy. Lucy knows me, and yet she's very fond of me."

"*You* care about your profession! Why, you are a cheat and a quack!" the thin voice shrilled scornfully. She pointed the finger of scorn at him quite literally. "And who may Lucy be? Another wretched dupe whom you'd see die in prison without turning a hair or raising your little finger to help her?"

"I *wouldn't!*" shouted the doctor. He sprang to his feet, but at that moment three girls, linked hand-in-hand, and swinging their arms in time to the tune they sang, sank laughing on the bench. They came between him and that most ghastly old woman, that embodiment of sin and decay. He strode by them still shouting, "I wouldn't! Lucy knows that I wouldn't!" But the end of the bench was empty.

The girls clung together, still laughing, but rather scared. Was this portly, bearded foreigner mad or very drunk?

He met their frightened glances and apologised. "Why, I think I must have had a bad dream—one should never fall asleep out of doors. I beg your pardon a thousand times."

He lifted his hat and went on his way, but he knew that he had not been dreaming.

. . . . .

Lucilla had pined and eaten her heart out, but had never written a word to the doctor; she was too proud to write, poor soul! and too sore.

"If Wallace dislikes me now I shall certainly never force myself on him. I would far rather die than do that," she said to herself.

One day she was so ill that she could not manage to dress herself, and returned to bed with a certain doleful satisfaction in the conviction that she was actually dying. The satisfaction lasted till a violent pain in her head gave her no time for

sentiment. The violent pain got worse and worse, till at last she was no longer conscious that she felt it, but lay with wide-open eyes chattering the wildest nonsense. Late in the afternoon the landlady found her in this state, and sent to the address Jeronime had written on a card, but Jeronime had gone to Paris, and it was Mrs. de Grouchy who came to the rescue. No one in the house knew where Dr. MacIlvert lived in Paris, so that it was impossible to telegraph to him. Emma could only trust (rather doubtfully) that Jeronime had prevailed on her enemy to come and see after his own business.

Certainly it was an odd state of affairs. Emma de Grouchy sat by this poor lady's bedside, and did the best she could for her, because there really seemed to be no one else to do anything; but the situation was awkward. She sent for her own doctor, but, as ill-luck would have it, he was out of town, and while she waited the afternoon dragged to evening, and poor Lucilla talked incessantly about everything in heaven and earth except her husband's address. She assured Mrs. de Grouchy with much earnestness that diamond brooches were constantly found in workboxes without any blame attaching to any one. She did not desire an investigation, because if you knocked too loud and too often at a closed door the devil might open to you. Then she repeated over and over again, "You should be careful how you knock at closed doors—you should be careful how you knock at closed doors, Lucy," and Emma knew that the doctor must have said that. His speeches were threaded here and there among Lucilla's, and had evidently so impressed her that she repeated them by heart. They were sometimes witty, and usually humorous. Emma, who was the soul of honour, tried not to understand too much, but could not help feeling very sorry for this poor lady, who presently babbled disconnectedly of red roses and blue lakes and broiled trout, and then again cried pathetically, "Two months—only two months' happiness, is that all?"

Emma kept out the inquisitive landlady, but she asked herself what right she had to interfere or to take on herself

to guard Mrs. MacIlvert's secrets? None in the world, certainly, except perhaps that of common humanity, which seems to claim more and more as years increase! She wished she had not wasted time in sending for her own doctor. On learning that he was away, she despatched a messenger for another, and she rejoiced on hearing a man's voice in the hall, thinking that the "other" must have come. He certainly wasted no time, but ran straight upstairs, and without even knocking at the door walked in unannounced. Emma thought that odd of him, but then with mingled relief and repugnance guessed that this was not *a* but *the* doctor.

"Mrs. MacIlvert is very ill. I am thankful that you are here at last," Emma said severely.

He paid no attention to her, but went at once to the bedside and took Lucilla's wrist in his hand.

"Tch, tch! How long has she been like this?" he asked.

"Since this morning, I believe," said Emma.

"Come, can't you be sure?—there's no use in 'believing,'" said he roughly.

Emma thought that he was pretty cool, though had she but known it, it was a significant fact that he had not at once grasped who she was and how she came to be there.

"I did not get here till half-past four this afternoon," said she.

"Did you take her temperature then?" he asked, and proceeded to take it, muttering something that sounded like "A pack of idiots."

The poor woman on the bed was quieter. Emma watched him for a minute, and then picked up her cloak and prepared to leave.

"Your landlady sent to my house for Mrs. Knight, who has been staying with me, but who is in France. I came to see if I could be of any use in her absence, and I stayed because there seemed to be nobody else to take care of Mrs. MacIlvert. I took the liberty of sending for a doctor. I did not know that you would be here to-day," she explained.

He turned round sharply then. "Oh, I see! I thought you were a nurse. I gave Mrs. Smythe credit for having had

sense enough to get one! I beg your pardon, I'm sure. You'll be Mrs. de Grouchy, eh? I saw Mrs. Knight in Paris. She told me Lucy was ill. I didn't think it was as bad as this. I'm glad you've sent for another doctor. That's all right, I should have done it myself. We're much obliged to you."

He opened the door for her as he spoke, and Emma, suddenly realising that he was really horribly anxious, held out her hand. No woman, however much she may disapprove of a man, ever remains unmoved by the sight of his genuine anxiety.

"I hope very much that your wife will get better," she said gently.

"Thank you, thank you," said he, taking her hand in his substantial grip. "Oh yes, she'll get better, she'll pull through! She must, she *must*, you know, for I can't afford to lose Lucy."

CHAPTER XXX

It seemed that Lucilla responded to the doctor's "must." She got better—up to a certain point. He pulled her back again; he coaxed the very flickering and uncertain spark of life into a steadier, though still weak, flame, but he had a hard fight for it, and the victory was still far from final or triumphant. Lucilla, when she became conscious of her surroundings, was miserable if her husband was out of her sight, though there were days and hours when she was excited and even terrified by his presence. He felt that last phase hard on him; it did not appear to him that he had ever done anything to terrify her. The illness was pronounced to be a form of influenza, aggravated by nervous shock. In the meanwhile Dr. MacIlvert's patients in Paris waited for him, and he ruefully reckoned how many guineas an hour he lost! When Lucilla was able to sit up he rushed over to France for a few hours and returned to her again the following day. The nurse said that she had been restless and fretful during his absence, but she made no complaints. If his Paris venture were to fail they would be really beggared, and he felt that he ought to be in the Rue C——t. On the other hand, he believed that if he left Lucilla the spark that he had so carefully nursed would go out, and this very unstable and unsatisfactory condition of affairs lasted an unconscionable time.

"Do you know why you are not getting on faster, Lucy?" he said suddenly one day.

Lucilla started. She was dreadfully nervous.

"I don't know, I am sure! It's your business to find out that, Wallace," said she.

They were *tête-à-tête* and she was leaning back on the

pillows he had piled in a most comfortable armchair, and was idly watching him make the tea. Since he had come back Lucilla had been served well; no one ever ventured to send up cold tea now, and the armchair had been commandeered from Mrs. Smythe's own sitting-room.

"Well, I'll tell you for why," said he. "It's because you don't really wish to get better, and how am I to cure that? Drink your tea, Lucy, before you answer me."

"I swallow all the quantities of things you pour down my throat and I never do anything I'm told not to do! I think I am a model patient!"

"A model patient! No, you're not! You're not putting any heart into the job," he persisted.

Lucilla looked at him rather wistfully.

"Do you think I just fancy that I am ill?"

"Oh no! you've been ill enough, but you won't die of a good honest illness, my dear—you'll die because you've let go. That's what's the matter with you, and I want you to hold on harder. Why don't you? You're not an old woman yet! It will be time enough to give in when you've touched your hundred, eh? There's no need to exchange life for death before then. Why, there's one of my patients in Paris—she's seventy-three years of age and she has twice your spirit! Not that you used to be wanting in spirit—I will say that for you."

Lucilla, listening to him, thought that she understood why he did so much good to sick and sorry people. He impressed them with the vital necessity of holding on. But she shook her head.

"The fact is you like being petted!" he cried, laughing, though at heart he was not particularly merry. "But, on my word, Lucy, I'll take plenty of care of you, if you'll only set yourself vigorously to getting well! Come now, we haven't got on so badly; we've never quarrelled but once, and then it was entirely your own fault. Are you fretting about that still?"

"I could not bear you to do such things," said Lucilla in a low voice.

"Well, it's all right, and Madame Colomb gave me the

introductions I wanted after all, so you didn't do so much harm," he said cheerfully. "You are doing me a great deal more harm now by keeping me kicking my heels here when we should be in France."

"Then go back to France!" she cried quickly. "I don't want to keep you for one minute, Wallace."

"Oh yes, you do!" he replied coolly. "If I go you will just slip out of the world, and I don't want that to happen! I've had trouble enough in coaxing you back! Oh, deuce take it, Lucy! why don't you *want* to live? How is it possible that any sane person shouldn't want to live?" It was a genuine burst of impatient wonder. He could have taken Lucilla by the shoulders and shaken her, if that would have done any good.

"I'm sure I've seen enough of the hard and rough side of life, while you've been lapped in luxury, wound round in cotton-wool, and kept in a hot-house! Yet *I* don't want to die! The smallest room in the world is bigger than a coffin, and the darkest place is lighter than a grave! I'd fight for my life up to the last gasp, I can tell you. I'd fight for yours too, or for any one's, for the matter of that."

"I know that you would," said Lucilla, "But I don't think that I have any horror of death. We must all come to him—even you must one day. You are always fighting him, and that is why you hate him, but he can cure some aches and pains that no one else can touch." She flushed a little and looked up at him with a faint revival of the playful defiance with which she had often met him in the old days.

"He is the best doctor of all!" she cried. "You never like to be told that any one is cleverer than you are, but he beats you in the long run."

Her words made him think about that extraordinary experience he had had in the Bois du Boulogne. The remembrance was like a cold finger on his heart, but he thrust it aside, because he was determined to get to the root of the evil.

"Now tell me," he said, "what is it that so troubles you that you imagine that *I* can't help you, but that death can?"

"We were speaking impersonally. You have always said that women have a bad habit of making arguments personal."

"Never mind what I have said. Don't fence, my dear! I want to know what's the matter. I shall not allow you to go to that other doctor while I can prevent it! Good heavens, woman, do you think it's pleasanter in a churchyard than here, or that you'll have better company under the earth than you have when you lie in my arms? Come, I want an answer. What's wrong with you, Lucy?"

"I can't tell you," said Lucilla hopelessly. "I do not know how to explain."

"Try—I am not stupid. I shall understand," said he; but she taxed his understanding.

He was fond of his wife, really much fonder of her than he had guessed himself to be, and he knew very well that she loved him. He was dimly aware that he had sometimes shocked and startled her; till now he had no idea how much.

"You have been very good to me," she kept repeating. "Every one told me that you wouldn't be. Every one thinks that you are bad, but you have been good to me. But, of course, I know now that you have done some wicked things and that you don't mind them so very much. You did put that brooch in little Joy's basket long ago, didn't you? Oh, don't answer! I *know!* I was far worse than you were, because in my heart I knew then, but I loved you, and I did not dare look at the knowledge. We behaved wickedly to Jeronime! Mr. Knight told me that I was behaving wickedly, but I wouldn't attend to him. I felt that if I attended to him I might have to give you up. I shut my eyes, but yet I saw even in the dark! And I put my fingers in my ears, but I heard. There were a great many stories about you; I wished to disbelieve them all, but you wouldn't let me! When you blackmailed Madame Colomb I knew that you *could* have done almost anything that was wicked, and you didn't even see that it was an awful thing to have done! That was what frightened me so! You weren't disturbed about it! If you had committed some great crime in a passion and then been horrified at yourself—like Cain—I

could have understood better, but when you did a horribly mean thing in cold blood it—it frightened me!"

"You'd rather I had killed Abel?" said the doctor. "That's just like you, Lucy! It's the feminine view! Now I'll tell you something. No one commits the one great crime unless he has led up to it by a hundred small ones. You'd have found Cain far worse to live with than I am. But go on; my depravity horrified you—well?"

"But I wanted you to be good, because, just lately especially, I've known that the *real* you can be so good, Wallace! Why, think, only think, how patient you can be and how hopeful and clever and persevering! You couldn't be the doctor you are if you were all bad! Besides, you wouldn't be so alive, because goodness *is* life. Then I thought——"

"Let's have it all, my dear."

"I thought if you had only married some one else—some one young and good and strong—you might have fallen in love with her and she might have saved you. You see, I am old, and you liked my money very much and married me partly—perhaps altogether—for that. Oh, I couldn't help knowing it from the kind of way you talked. But in spite of that you have been good to me, Wallace, and now I want you to be good to yourself. Sometimes I hope that if I die now you may do very well. You won't have as much as I should have left you if that money hadn't been lost, but you'll have whatever there *is*, and you are succeeding in Paris, aren't you? Perhaps the good part of you will grow bigger and bigger now, and wherever I am I shall be glad if I know that—or, if I don't know, that doesn't so much matter so long as it is so. You don't believe we live after death, do you? It never seemed to be so important before that people should be good, but now I care because I love you so, and—don't laugh! please don't laugh! —though you are so much stronger than I am and so much cleverer, yet when I dream of you—and I dream of nothing else now—I dream that I have to take care of your soul and that it is something quite tiny and easy to kill, but always

there—always there. Of course that is nonsense. You'll say it is the sort of nonsense women dream who have no children. But don't laugh——"

"I was never less inclined to laugh," he said. "Go on."

"But that's all. I never meant to say so much, but all these thoughts have grown so strong, and when I was ill they were always taking forms and shapes. Do you know how one's thoughts get outside one's brain when one is ill, and begin to take bodies and walk about the room, Wallace? The horrible ones take very ugly shapes and hide behind curtains and lie in wait and peep."

"I know, I know; but I don't believe your thoughts of me need have made you so afraid, Lucy," he said. "Come now, you make me feel very small, but I'm not so bad as that! We'll strike a bargain, eh? You may take care of my soul, and I'll take care of your body. Can't you manage to want to live for that? Now I am going to have my turn and tell you something. You may laugh or not just as you like! It's the maddest telling you ever heard. On the night before I came home I went and sat in the Bois de Boulogne, and what in heaven or earth or—t'other place, do you suppose I saw?"

Lucilla shook her head, rather bewildered by the sudden change of subject.

"I don't know. You've told me about a great many strange sights."

"This was the strangest! I saw a wraith! It was the wraith of Lady Alice Lennox who poisoned her husband. She spoke to me. She stuck to that old lie! I believe she'll stick to it before the Judgment-seat—if there is one. She's been the curse of my life, and she died cursing me."

Lucilla looked at him doubtfully.

"But you can't really believe that you saw the wraith of Lady Alice? It is impossible."

"Is it? Would you like to know what she said to me? Come, you used to like ghost-stories! She said, 'When the walls close round you and the grey days slowly begin to kill you, you'll long for something outside yourself, but there won't be anything—and I shall be glad.'"

Lucilla shivered. "But how horrible!"

"Well, so it was!" he said gravely. "She made me creep—but she was always a liar. She may say I'm a quack—people do say that, eh?—but that's because sick folk won't take unadulterated truth. You have to silver pills before they'll swallow 'em. The necessary thing is to get them to take what's for their good. It doesn't matter *how*, so long as you do it. She said I cared for nothing outside my own skin."

"She was wrong," said Lucilla.

He looked at her with some eagerness, as if for once he needed corroboration.

"I said I was fond of you. She swore I'd see you die without turning a hair or raising a little finger to help you but I said I *wouldn't!* Are you going back on me, Lucy?"

Well, now they had got to the object of the story, she knew now why he had narrated it.

"Did this really happen?" she asked.

It occurred to her that if Wallace thought he could cure her by inspiring her with the desire to live, that if he knew that no motive could be so strong as the knowledge that he needed her, why then he was quite capable of inventing anything, even such a story as that, to effect his purpose. Had he not just declared that it didn't matter *how* you did a necessary thing so long as you accomplished it?

"It happened," he said. "If I had made up a story, I'd have made it more likely, my dear! I've told you the naked truth, and what's more, you are the only soul in the world to whom I would tell it. I can't say more than that! You must believe me, Lucy."

But he watched her face rather anxiously. He was trying a remedy he wasn't quite sure of this time.

"Do you really care much whether I live or die?" said Lucilla.

"And if I didn't why should I try so hard to keep you?"

"Ah, because you have a passion for doctoring!" cried Lucilla. "That I never doubt! That was why you felt merciless to Lady Alice—she killed your patient! You could

never get over that, even though you had been in love with her!"

"No, I couldn't, I couldn't," he said. "I don't know that much love went to the connection. I'm fonder of you than ever I was of Lady Alice. If *you* go and die, just for want of spirit to live, I'll never forgive you, Lucy!" He laughed, but Lucilla felt that under the laughter he was in earnest. "No, I'll never forgive you! I'll not be putting flowers on your grave, nor going in for any pretty laments over you, such as you'd like. All I'll say will be that my wife was too poor a thing to stand by me. She had lots of high falutin' sentiments, and could talk by the yard (as they all can) about eternal love and constancy, and the Lord knows what! She knew perfectly when she married me that I wasn't made of sugar and spice, but when it was brought home to her she played me a trick that would have riled a saint, and that could only be justified —now you just mind this, my dear lady—that could only be justified by a very great affection for me. After that, because I really was angry (and who wouldn't have been?) and it came to the pinch, she just went and deserted me!"

"But, Wallace," cried Lucilla in amazement, "I thought that it was you who deserted me!"

"And how far off did I go? Why, to the other side of the duck-pond," said he, "and how soon could I get back when I heard you were ailing? Why, in a matter of nine hours. But how far off from me will you go if you die, Lucy?"

"I don't know," murmured Lucilla feebly.

"Oh, you don't know! And how soon would you get back if I wanted you? They don't seem to manage the return journey often, those who go that way. Oh, you don't know that either. Then think shame of yourself, my dear!"

This vigorous turning of tables left Lucilla hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry.

"But indeed, Wallace," she said, "it was because I loved you that I burnt that letter. I am glad you understand that!"

"Well, I'm not a fool! and of course that *is* your justification, as I remarked," said he. "But upon my word, if you don't try to get well I shan't believe in it."

And with that he closed the discussion. He really had done his best for Lucilla.

Having administered that remarkable mixture of encouragement and threat, of bitter and sweet, he went out to get an evening paper, leaving his patient to rest. He opened the paper as he walked, and his eyes fell at once on an announcement that made him exclaim aloud.

"Death of Lady Alice Lennox."

"Lady Alice Lennox, who was the notorious heroine of a most sensational trial for murder, died in Paris on the night of the 15th of this month. Our readers will remember that she was sentenced to death, which sentence was afterwards commuted to imprisonment for life. Her mind became slightly deranged during the last years of her incarceration, and she was released three months before her death, and expired peacefully in a room in a retired quarter of the French capital. We understand that the doctor, through whose instrumentality the culprit was brought to justice, and who was nearly lynched by a mob at the close of the trial, is now a prominent figure in Paris, and is the exponent of a new system of curing by colour."

On the 15th! and it had been on the 10th that he had met her. Then he had seen her *in* and not out of the flesh!

"Well, well, what a donkey I was! My nerves never played me such a trick before! There must be something wrong with my digestion," said the doctor.

He put the paper in his pocket, but did not tell Lucilla what he had discovered, for she had had enough excitement for one day. She was tired and could not eat her dinner. He talked cheerfully on commonplace subjects, but was secretly anxious as to the wisdom of his treatment. Yet surely if anything could make a woman wish to live it would be the persuasion that the man she loved wanted her! He sent her to bed early and sat up to write business letters. Presently he heard her call him and went quickly to her.

Lucilla was sitting up in bed with a bright spot of colour on either cheek.

"Wallace," she said, "I've been thinking of what you told

me. It was *not* a spirit from the other world! I don't believe that hate lives on like that! It was the poor, wretched creature herself who spoke to you."

"You're right, so it was. But you need not have stayed awake to tell me that."

"I am thankful there is still time," she cried rather feverishly. "Wallace, I wish you would try to help her. She must be very miserable, and if all that happened was even partly your fault——"

"It wasn't!" he said indignantly. "She said she did it for my sake in order to make an impression on the jury."

"Oh, help her—try to help her if you can, because you did her harm."

"I couldn't if I would! She's dead now, anyhow! I did not mean to have let you talk more about that old tale to-night, but listen to this, Lucy," and he read the newspaper paragraph aloud. "You see she's past praying for! Why, what's the matter? Lucy, stop crying! You are silly over this business! Why in the world should you trouble your head about Lady Alice Lennox?"

"I am sorry it's too late! Wallace, it is so awful to think that a woman who loved you was shut up in a prison till she went mad. Does it not haunt you? Don't you *care?*"

"No, she did *me* a lot of harm, if you like, and the one creature she loved to excess was herself. Probably that's why she went mad. You'll follow her example if you never shut your eyes and go to sleep."

"But do be sorry, Wallace. I feel somehow as if you should be! When that fearful thing happened, did you never feel sick because you had—had flirted with her?"

"I felt sick when I found traces of poison," he said drily. "Afterwards I hadn't much time to waste in penitence. I wanted all my power to keep my head above water. And why, if you please, should I be soft-hearted? To whom should I abase myself? The Maker of Alice made her with less than the usual modicum of natural affection and with strong passions—she acted accordingly. I don't want to shock you, my dear, but I've never seen such signs of beneficence in the

world that I can become sentimental about the Creator of it. It's *not* made on a sentimental plan, though there are good people as well as criminals in it, healthy as well as sick; and both always act according to the nature they've been born with."

"I can't argue about that," said Lucilla. "But I think I was born selfish and jealous, and I know that whenever I thought about Lady Lennox I hated her, yet I don't hate her now! I am sorry—sorry. There must be something that grows and changes in us."

"So you were jealous of Lady Alice?" he said laughing. "You needn't have been; but I never guessed it."

The laugh jarred on Lucilla, but then she shook her head.

"You don't guess quite everything, Wallace—not even everything about yourself."

"No, I don't. I'm not young enough to suppose that I do," he said good-naturedly; "and I'll own *you've* been a bit of a revelation to me—you see, I was never married before, and no one ever liked me quite so well! Now go to sleep! Go to sleep; and mind, you must get well after all this."

The next day she seemed better. He was very pleased, so pleased and triumphant that poor Lucilla learned to be quite clever at concealing occasional lapses rather than disappoint him. He flattered himself that he really had revived the salutary desire for life, and he managed to take her to Paris and to establish her under his own roof again.

Once back in France he flung himself into his work with renewed energy, though his wife's pretty room became the heart of the house to him. It was a very pretty room, for he was proud of having fulfilled a promise and surrounded her with luxuries again. He liked to see Lucilla on a sofa with flowers about her. He liked to think that *he* provided the flowers, and he liked, being very human, to see her face light up when he came in. He certainly was not given to shirking facts as a rule, but he would not own that the tide was fairly on the ebb, and that with his best endeavours he could not turn it now! Lucilla herself faced death very quietly, and one day, it was only a few days before the end, she insisted on telling him the truth.

"I can't help it, so you will have to forgive me, Wallace," said she. "I am not really better, though I *have* tried to be. I think that that other doctor we spoke of will be too strong for you this time."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" he said quickly.

Lucilla's eyes rested on him with a wonderfully happy expression.

"You really do want me! You really are very fond of me! Every one said I was mad when I married you, Wallace—you must tell them all that I was glad I did it! Now remember, I am glad I did it."

He made no reply, perhaps at the moment, he actually couldn't, and her mood changed.

"But there are some things I am unhappy about still. I wish so much that we had not behaved badly to poor little Joy and to Lady Alice. I wish we had not! I wish we had not put that brooch in the child's basket, I wish we had never been grasping and selfish and unscrupulous—I wish we hadn't——"

"You never put anything into Jeronime's basket; and you had never anything in the world to do with Lady Alice Lennox. Don't be silly, Lucy!" he said.

"You or I—it's all one now," said Lucilla. "I am so tired, Wallace, I really can't tell Jeronime I am sorry now. I get so confused and I say the wrong words, but you'll remember, won't you? You'll put it all right yet, for *you* are not soon going to die."

"Nor are you! You're foolish to-night. But why should you die," said he.

"Why? I don't know, but I daresay it's a good thing. You turned everything upside down for me, you know, and I think I was too old for that. It gave me a sort of shake that has made me unable to—to——"

Her voice trailed off weakly. "I can't find the right expression, Wallace."

"Never mind. Don't worry about it! What does it matter?" he said; but after a minute added—

"I am sorry I've been a brute to you, Lucy. I am much

sorrier for that than for anything else I've ever done wrong in all my life. I meant to make you happy. You are the one person I've had cause to be grateful to, and I *am* fond of you, my dear."

"You haven't been a brute to me," said Lucilla. "What did you say once?—that time when the money had all gone and I was so frightened—that you were made more or less of a knave, and I more or less of a fool, so we were bound to come together. Yes, but there is something besides that. God has more merciful thoughts than people have, deeper and—and with no mocking in them. Perhaps He knew that a better woman wouldn't have loved you so much, so He let it be *me*. But you'll tell Jeronime we are sorry, won't you?"

"I'll tell any one anything you like, when you are well, Lucy," said he.

"Ah, then that's all right," said Lucilla, settling herself to sleep. "I shall be well soon."

That was on a Monday, and on the Thursday night Lucilla died, very painlessly, and in Dr. MacIlvert's arms. He sent the nurse out of the room, and they were quite alone. He came out presently, and told the nurse it was over.

"Lucy's gone. The other doctor *was* too strong for me. I knew all along that he would be," he said.

The nurse fancied he was blaming the Frenchman who had been called in in consultation, but Dr. MacIlvert was not thinking about him.

CHAPTER XXXI

JERONIME had returned from what she believed to have been an unsuccessful mission, to find her baby sickening for measles. For some weeks she was too engrossed with her own affairs to have any thoughts to spare for Lucilla's. I fear that her baby's rash was of more importance to her than her godmother's broken heart. She loved her child with an almost fierce intensity. Not till Thomasina recovered did she know once more that the sun shone and that the world was young and fair.

Madame Colomb laughed at her, but was thankful enough that the child got well satisfactorily.

"Not that the little thing was ever in the slightest danger!" she remarked. "It is only that Jeronime expends on that small white mouse an energy that would move a mountain! It is because she has never been really in love! All she has goes to her child! Sometimes I think it is not safe to care for anything so much as all that—to love to excess always brings disaster."

Jeronime felt as if all the bells in the capital ought to have rung peals when Thomasina was pronounced perfectly well; but she had never loved Paris, and she carried her treasure off to the coast, for a blow of salt air, before returning to the Yellow House. The sea, to her mind, was the best doctor of all, and she was very content to sit with her baby on the shore, and to build castles, and to watch Thomasina's small waxen fingers, fingering pebbles tentatively, and growing browner and fatter in the process.

When she had taken leave of Monsieur Colomb, she had thanked him shyly for his kindness.

"You have been very good," she had said.

The old man had answered, "No, madame—I am not good, but I am old. I am at the last lessons in the spelling-book. Words that need careful spelling are on the last page."

Jeronime found lodgings in a little watering-place in Brittany and it was there that Quentin Mavis, who was once again spending a holiday in France, brought her the tidings of Mrs MacIlvert's death. Jeronime wept some salt and bitter tears over that tragedy which she felt she but dimly and imperfectly understood. She put her poor godmother's death down to the doctor's account, for to believe heartily in a devil simplifies so many problems.

"Poor godmother! She died because that dreadful man left her all alone while he enjoyed himself in Paris. The only comfort is that some day he must get what he deserves—but even that won't be any consolation to godmother," said Jeronime.

Quentin Mavis had an immense reverence for her. Jeronime was his ideal of womanhood, as well as the woman he loved, but all that did not prevent his listening to this speech with a glimmer of amusement.

"Mrs. MacIlvert died in her husband's house, and I've heard he hardly left her during the last days of her illness. Perhaps he didn't behave so badly to her; she always stuck up for him, anyhow!" he said.

"Oh, of course she did! That counts for nothing," said Jeronime. "Poor godmother! I was such a stolid, stupid, unresponsive child to her. I was stupider with her than with any one; and now I can never, never make it up! It's too late!"

Her eyes filled, and she pushed away the comfort he would fain have offered her. Quentin's hour had not come yet, and he reluctantly left her sitting on the beach with her child.

She sat and thought and dreamed, but not of Quentin, nor of her own future. She saw no ships a-sailing with love aboard for her, only, very far away, visions of the land where all things are made new, where, perhaps, her dear Mr. Knight might welcome her again, and where they would go hand-in-

hand quite quietly through a mansion more beautiful than the Yellow House—into a home where no tragedy had ever happened and where happiness dwelt for ever; not a flying, feverish Happiness, for whom men fight and struggle, and who vanishes if one but snatches too roughly at her garments, but Happiness at peace and undismayed, sitting for ever in her own place.

There was plenty of time for dreams, for Jeronime stayed by the sea till Mary's month was crowned with blossom. Her nature seemed to need stretches of solitude, and she was glad to sort her impressions with only her baby to bear her company. Baby grew strong and vigorous; Jeronime was glad because her first playfellow was Thomasina's playfellow too. She vowed that she would bring the child to the sea every year, but it should not roll between them. There should be no terrible, desolate memory in this little one's mind—no dim, childish recollection of being left behind in a strange country, to terrible, strange people.

When at last they returned to the Yellow House it seemed too big for one woman and a child, but Jeronime knew that Mr. Knight's daughter must not have her home anywhere else! Besides, she loved the place; every rood of it was dear to her.

She certainly felt lonely on the evening of their home-coming. She lingered in the nursery for a long time, feeling that the sleeping child hallowed the old house, for where a baby is, there surely must watching angels be; but the solitary dinner saddened her. She could not bear to go into the library, and she escaped to the wholesome welcome of the garden.

She flung a shawl over her head, and ran down to the lake, where she sat on Mr. Knight's favourite seat and thought of the many occasions on which she had disturbed his meditations there when she was a child, and of how often she had escaped from Hollowdene and taken the short cut across the copse to visit her "greatest friend." Poor godmother! There had been times when she had looked rather askance at that quaint friendship—times before the reappearance of the

doctor. Poor godmother! Jeronime wished she could have seen her once more. It was hard to believe that that eager, emotional, restless woman was dead. A sad life on the whole, and a sad death!

While she pondered over these things, crudely trying to understand the meaning of them, she idly watched a man who was walking along the short cut and down to the bridge at one end of the lake, and then over the bridge and on the path which led to the seat. When he came near she recognised, with a start of indignation, that the man was Dr. MacIlvert.

He came up to her with his usual assurance. "How do you do, Mrs. Knight?" said he. "I saw you from the brow of the hill, though my eyes are not quite so young as they were, and I took the liberty of climbing a fence and making a bee-line for you."

Jeronime silently agreed that it *was* a liberty, and he read her silence aright.

"You came to see me, you know," said he; "this is a return visit, eh? This time I have something to say to you, and to give you. I have come to England for the purpose of saying it and of giving it. I suppose you know that my wife is dead?"

"Yes," said Jeronime.

Now that he was close beside her she saw in his face that he had suffered, and that surprised her.

"Lucy wished you to have some of her trinkets—some that she possessed before her marriage," he explained; "I have brought them myself. A few are of some value. Would you like to see them now? I was intending to take them to the house, but when I saw you sitting alone here I determined to seize the opportunity of speaking to you at once."

He held out a parcel; Jeronime took it awkwardly. She was touched because Lucilla had remembered her, but unwilling to accept anything from the hands of Dr. MacIlvert.

"Sit down, sit down, my dear lady! You can't untie a string like that."

He sat down on the seat himself, and Jeronime perforce sat beside him.

She unwrapped a jewel-case, and he produced a key from his waistcoat pocket.

"I promised my wife that I would take the things to you, but I won't go inside your house," he said, "for I am sure you had rather I didn't. This is a funny place to choose for looking at trinkets, isn't it?' But no matter! We all do funny things at times."

Jeronime had opened the box now, and behold! a paste brooch was the first thing which met her gaze. Involuntarily she lifted her eyes to his. He really was an extraordinarily unblushing person, she thought.

"Yes—yes, I see! I fancied you might remember all about that," he said coolly. "Well, as I've just said, we all do funny things at times."

"It is the brooch that you conjured into my work-basket. I do not think that it was—funny," said Jeronime.

"It wasn't in the end," said the doctor. He cleared his throat; for once he was embarrassed. "I don't suppose you'll ever forgive me that trick. As a matter of fact I shouldn't so much mind whether you do or do not; but Lucy took it all to heart. She had it on her conscience, poor soul, that we had treated you very badly. She didn't treat you badly, you know, but being my wife——"

He came to a dead stop. He had seldom found words fail, but Jeronime, looking at him in unmingled surprise, saw that his eyes were full of tears. No one, not even Lucilla, had seen that sight before.

"Why—you are sorry for her!" said Jeronime.

"Oh, *she's* all right, I suppose—I'm sorry for myself," said he. "But look here, my dear madam, I didn't come to see you in order to talk sentiment, but to do what she got me to promise to do. Come, now, will you forgive us, eh? Lucy bid me ask you to."

Jeronime looked at him, momentarily doubting. Then her long-sighted eyes, that sometimes missed details close to them, that found life puzzling, and yet at rare intervals saw to the heart of a matter, saw his sincerity despite herself. It was odd that the doctor, of all people, should have brought her

increased vision, but there and then she knew that "poor godmother's" life had not been wasted, for, as Lucilla herself had known when she lay dying, in ways that are not our ways, with thoughts that are not as our thoughts, the Great Maker everlastingly fashions the souls that are inevitably His.

She held out her hand to the doctor, thereby in turn surprising him.

"You? *Yes*," she said. "There was nothing to forgive godmother."

He shook her hand heartily.

"Mind you don't get robbed on the way home," he said cheerfully, dropping the last rather awkward subject. "I believe I had better see you safe inside your own door. It is a lonely bit through the park. Come, I'll carry the pomps and vanities for you."

He strode along by her side till they reached the Yellow House.

"Why, it's too big a place for you alone, you know, but I daresay some one will explain that to you one day," he remarked, then laughed at Jeronime's disgusted face. "You won't be so shocked when the right man tells you so!" he said. "Well, well! you never liked my jokes, but we'll part —not enemies, eh?"

He had nearly said friends, but realised that discretion was the better part of valour.

Then he returned to the lake, and, sitting down again on the bench, gave himself up to a very bad hour.

He had hated coming to this part of the world. He missed Lucy more than he had believed he could miss any one; he grieved bitterly for her, he was really filled with remorse when he thought about that time when he had left her in anger, and let her eat her heart out by herself in uncomfortable lodgings. The whimsical, hysterical, rich woman whom he had wooed for the sake of her possessions had, after all, given him the best love he had known, and had awakened in him the tenderest feeling of which he was capable.

As he sat there a cold horror crept over him, like the horror he had felt when the ghost of his old sins had spoken to him;

but this time he knew that it was a horror of himself. His best work was mixed with quackery, his wife was dead, and it seemed to him that that too was his fault.

There had been weak places, joints in the hard armour of selfishness that had encased his soul. If he had never cared about his profession he would have connived at a hideous crime, and he would have been saved from the ruin which followed; if he had had no love for Lucy he would have been spared *this* pain. He was inclined to declare that one had better, then, be wholly bad! For the arrows of the Lord are very sharp! Then he shuddered again, for one's soul, like one's body, clings to life. If Lucy had not left him she might have brought him some comfort.

There was a Doctor once who had a passion for healing sick souls as well as sick bodies, to whom the maimed and halt and blind came never in vain, at the fire of whose mighty love it was said that many accounted dead were warmed into life. *This* doctor, who had not much faith in that old story, yet thought of it wistfully now.

The night fell, and he still sat with his head bowed on his hands.

The Yellow House gleamed pale through the trees, the moon rose silver behind it, as it had risen on the night when Thomas Knight had looked from his window at the Seven Brothers he saved from the axe.

Old sins, old virtues, crimes and heroic deeds seemed rustling once again among the rustling leaves. By her baby's side Jeronime said her prayers, "Deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom."

The garden was full of life, the Resurrection of the Dead was going on very vigorously there at any rate; that cheerful symbolism of Spring, that touches the eternal hope of our hearts and whispers that though a man falls, yet he may rise, that though his sins cover the earth and meet him like evil spectres of decay, yet shall his eyes behold goodness and know it fair. But when and how and where that time shall come to each individual soul, who knows?

At last the doctor got up and shook himself. He was

cold and stiff; he mourned, as he did most things, thoroughly.

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